

RUSSIAN ROULETTE



Russian Roulette

A young Corporation clerk is suspected of murdering a woman who has been his mistress. A journalist—an older man who has also been attracted by this woman—becomes interested in the clerk, then positively obsessed by him. Seeing in the clerk an image of his own younger self, the journalist attempts to escape from the prison of his personality and his failure by living vicariously through the other. Involved with the two men is a young girl, whose developing personality is shaped by their drama. The dénouement of this story, which is played out in a Northern seaside resort, with its grey boarding-houses and rainswept streets, is as startling as it is inevitable.

Russian Roulette



A novel by
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IT was a Wednesday evening—the resort's half-day—and in the Gresham business was brisk. The vast lounge was vividly animated. Beneath the great white globes of light there was a sustained jangle of movement, seemingly totally inco-ordinate, yet in some way falling, after a time, into the pattern of a surging ritual dance. The noise and smell of the room were almost palpable. The thin string music of the band provided the melodic line, over which the voices of the drinkers, the laughter, and the waiters' cries were the counterpoint.

Carr, against the bar, was drinking light ale. Wedged tightly, secure against those calling over his shoulder to the barmen, elbow and foot balanced, he was, after his fashion, enjoying himself. His face glistened with a thin coating of sweat. His two companions, wearing the extravagantly coloured shirts of provincial bohemianism, lacked the advantage of his grip on the bar rail, and were subject to the movements of those jockeying about them.

'Journalism,' Carr was saying, with a certain avuncular jocularity, but not without passion, 'journalism is the profession of the second-rate; the second-rate in talent if they are unable to accomplish anything more adult; the second-rate in mind if they believe there is value in what they are doing; or the second-rate in spirit if they lack the strength to withstand the horrors of reality. You see . . .'

'It's all very well, but . . .' began the man wearing the brown shirt, speaking very slowly, as if each word required separate cogitation.

' . . . you see. Wait, wait, wait. You see—now you've thrown me out. You see . . .'

Carr made a cosmos-embracing gesture with the hand holding the glass and raised it to his mouth again.

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'You, where do you come in?' said, his blue-shirted companion.

'I,' said Carr, 'I! The trouble with you saloon bar—I know this is the lounge, but no matter—the trouble with you saloon bar philosophers is you've no taste for generalization—like women. My personal position is irrelevant to the argument,' he added with a kind of comic dignity.

He put his glass down on the counter in a swill of beer suds. The orchestra had just completed a tune, and in the hiatus the voices of those at the bar sounded more strident, but without individuality, blending like the collective cries of a crowd at a football match. With affectionate superiority Carr surveyed the bar-standing faces of greed, anxiety, ignorance, lust, boredom or, simply, pleasure.

He picked up his glass, the drippings falling unregarded on to his trousers.

'It takes,' he began, 'it takes all sorts to make a world, as they do say . . .'

But his blue-shirted companion had been swept out of earshot by others attempting to force their way into the barman's range.

'Busy tonight,' said brown-shirt slowly and profoundly.

'Indeed it is,' Carr replied inattentively. With his eyes he was following the passage through the crowd of a slight, fair youth, who, self-consciously, looking at no-one, was walking towards the bar from the entrance.

'It's just like the Naafi,' brown-shirt said. 'Ah, happy days!'

The boy's cheeks and ears were highly coloured. His forehead was moist; his mouth was set, but insecurely, as if, were he to relax his grip, it would tremble uncontrollably; and his eyes met no-one's.

'Ah, the good old days,' Carr said. 'Good evening, Martin.'

The boy lifted his eyes to the height of Carr's chin, said 'hullo', the lines of his mouth remaining rigid, and walked past.

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• 'You were at Cairo,' brown-shirt said, 'remember. . . ?'

Carr turned his head and watched the boy as he stumbled, head only half-raised, through those lining the bar.

' . . . and they used to let down the net in front of the band when the fights started. The Aussies usually it was . . . '

As the boy stopped at the table against the wall, near the men's toilet, his back obscured Carr's vision of the woman seated there. He had observed her before, however: the bold legs insolently crossed, the rich, red-brown hair, the amused assurance with which she received the looks of the men, the generous mouth, the plump, white throat. She was dressed more expensively than most of the women in the room, but with an almost indefinable effect of gaudiness, so that she was conspicuous like an over-ripe fruit in a dessert dish.

'Indeed, I do,' Carr said. 'Are you ready for another?'

'Hullo,' the woman said, 'you've been a long time.'

'Is there anyone sitting here?' the boy, Robinson, said, pulling out a chair, not looking at her.

'No,' the woman said, 'no friends. I haven't made any friends tonight. You know I was waiting for you.'

Her voice was hoarse, as if she found exhalation an effort. She had a slight Tyneside accent.

'You know I didn't want to meet you here,' the boy said. 'There might . . . '

'You've got a bloody cheek,' the woman interrupted placidly. 'An hour late. I always come here on Fridays. I haven't picked up anyone, if that's what worrying you. What are you going to drink?'

'Whisky,' Robinson said sullenly.

'A light ale and a draught bass,' Carr said to the barman.

'It's all right; I'll pour my own out. Here's to the good old days.'

The effects of drink, even while one is still drinking, are

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not constant and the process of becoming intoxicated is irregular, with occasional retrogressions. Carr suddenly felt a stale weariness, conscious of the cigarette taste in his mouth and throat, the distension of his bladder, the sweat on the nape of his neck, while the violence of the noise, the pressure of so many breaths and bodies, set his nerves jangling. He drank half of the beer in his glass quickly, leaving a white foam mark on his upper lip.

'There was a good spirit in those days,' the man in the brown shirt said mournfully. 'Comradeship. One for all; all for each; pulling together. There was some purpose to it all.'

'It is the man who doesn't give two damns whether a million Chinese starve in agony,' Carr said, speaking rapidly, as if he had said it all before, 'whether the salt mines and the gas chambers decimate a race, who is the more likely to be kind to his wife, his comrades, polite to the man in front of him in the queue, the clerk behind the counter, blind beggars, than he who persuades himself he cares passionately about the fate of his nameless brothers in another continent, the unborn generations. Blake said that too, but not so well.'

'It didn't seem so then. It was different then,' brown-shirt said, out of his nostalgic dream.

'Yes, it was different then,' Carr repeated.

The woman paid the waiter for the drinks.

'It's just that they're different,' she said. 'Because you like women but the nancies like men. They're all right. I often wonder what it would be like with a girl,' she added reflectively.

'Are we going to stay here all night?' Robinson said, looking momentarily into her eyes, and then dropping his gaze again down to her plump, flawless throat. He spoke with an assumption of indifference that failed to mask his lack of confidence.

'All night!' the woman said. 'The night's nearly over.'

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It's . . .' She broke off to reach forward and pull the coat tails of a man leaving the toilet. 'Hullo, Louie,' she said, 'snubbing me?'

'Do you know who that woman is?' Carr said. 'The one just talking to the Jew-boy.'

'I've seen her about,' the man in the brown shirt replied. 'She's in here a lot. A lady of distinction. I don't know her name. You know that's Louie Hyams with her — Pioneer Corps, he was.'

'Yes, I know,' Carr said.

'Who's the angelic-looking boy?'

'Martin Robinson,' Carr replied. 'He's a clerk for the Corporation. Distinctive, certainly.'

His gaze lingered on her, falling to her legs. Her skirt was pulled up to a little above her knee; on the leg that was crossed over, the shoe hung loose from her heel and with her toes she was wriggling it slowly up and down. Her stockings were finely grained and the flesh beneath was visibly white.

When the young Jew had finished telling the story the woman laughed, incongruously crudely and raucously.

Robinson had not spoken since the Jew had joined them. Now he leaned forward and said rapidly, 'Have you heard the one about the Lancashire man and his wife who were on holiday in Salt Lake City?'

'Oh, yes, that's a good one,' Hyams said politely.

'Have you heard the one about the psychiatrist and the woman who was having a baby?' said the man in the brown shirt.

'I don't think so,' Carr said. 'Carry on.'

At five minutes to ten the lights were lowered and the band played the national anthem. Nearly everyone stood, most of the men removing their hats. At two tables in a corner of the lounge a party of elderly men and women sang the words loudly. When the band stopped playing,

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the barmen took the last orders of the favoured few and placed the towels over the beer handles.'

Briefly, Carr had a sense of exaltation, his senses raised to a high and unnatural pitch of receptiveness. Two windows had been opened above the bar to hasten the room's emptying, and the cooler night air caressed his head refreshingly.

As he walked towards the toilet he kept his eyes fixed on the woman. She had a small glass of spirits in her hand and another on the table in front of her. The Jew had left the table.

'Well, what's doing, Martin?' Carr said, dropping his hand on the boy's shoulder. He kept his eyes on the woman until she looked up at him, then held her candid gaze briefly, pointedly, before bending his head down to Robinson.

'No news for me? No scandals in the bureaucracy?'

'Hullo,' the boy said, without smiling. 'No, there's . . .'

'Enjoying yourself?' Carr went on, in almost a parody of heartiness. 'Among wine, women and song, temptations of the flesh and spirit.'

He looked at the woman again; she was picking up her coat and handbag from a chair.

'I don't often see you in here,' Carr said. 'It's not the . . .'

The woman suddenly smiled at him with a cool, polite absence of interest that acted like an emetic.

'Well, good night,' Carr said ineptly, and then to the woman, 'Err, good night,' and went.

The woman finished the drink in front of her in one swallow.

'I'm ready for off,' she said.

Carr said to himself: 'I grow old, I grow old. I shall wear my prophylactics rolled.'

Briefly he remembered past sexual encounters, successes and failures, in other bars, in other towns, in other years, and mourned. Then, articulating the words, 'Am I to sacri-

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After the well-being of intoxication for adolescent jealousy, wounded vanity?' he made his way to the lavatory.

And yet, that he knew left something unexplained of the causes of his chagrin, deflation.

The man next to him belched twice in quick succession. It was the young Jew, Hyams.

'Good night, old boy,' he said to Carr, supporting himself with his forearm against the tiles in front of him. 'Happy days.'

It was an early autumn evening, damp and windless. Outside the hotel there were a number of people, talking, waiting for adventure, or saying 'good night'. The resort's illuminations had been taken down, but a few tawdry, ineffective fairy lights still shone from some of the trees on the pavements, like the remaining unbroken lamps on a Christmas tree after the party.

'You want to come back with me?' the woman asked.

'If you want me to,' Robinson said defensively.

When he was with the woman, everything was a test—each word, each action, each reaction—a test of his manhood, to be examined and categorized.

'Sometimes,' she said, without anger, as if reproving a fractious child, 'you make me bloody sick. Do you want to, or don't you?'

He took hold of her arm and turned her towards him. He might have been about to strike her, or to cry.

She gave a little chuckle. 'Come on,' she said. Her voice was thick and the words slurred a little into each other, but she walked steadily.

They had turned off the main street, and along the road leading to the promenade, past the amusement arcades where the proprietors were pulling down the shutters over the dodgems, the test-your-strength machines, the love-fortunes and the peep-shows, past the bright, clinical milk-bars, with the juke-box jazz seeping into the damp night.

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'You know, you drink too much,' the woman said.

He might, in another mood, have been flattered.

'I drink too much! Well, what about you?'

'You drink too much,' the woman repeated. 'You're too young. It isn't good for you. You want to be careful.' She laughed. 'Will you be any good tonight? You know what you're like when you've had too much.'

She laughed again, and as they turned on to the promenade, where the fog was drifting in over the ornamental gardens, put her hand against his body.

'Not so good,' she said, 'now Louie would have . . .'

'Shut up,' Robinson said childishly. 'Shut up.'

He clutched her again and kissed her. She responded with tolerant acquiescence, opening her mouth obligingly, pushing forward her lips, and leaning on him, but without passion.

A car swung by the roundabout in front of the hospital, and its lights swept over them and away.

'Have you really been with Louie?' Robinson said, quite casually, as they walked on.

'No,' the woman said. 'Does it matter? I'm a kept woman, aren't I? He comes up with Ivy sometimes. I let them. He's good fun. He came once after they'd been over to Blackpool. Eddie was there and you know he doesn't like . . . well, you know what he is about the place. As soon as he came up, he started, Louie, I mean, to . . .'

'I don't think I'll come up tonight,' Robinson said precipitately, again with the assumption of casualness, like a witness preparing the ground for a lie.

'Well, for crying out loud!' the woman said. 'Would your mother worry where you were, or wouldn't your little Alice like it? I'll give you the money for the taxi.'

He had stopped walking again, and his face was working. The sirens of the ships sailing in and out of the estuary resounded through the fog, like the bleating of lost sheep.

The woman put out her hand and stroked his face.

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'Cherub,' she whispered, 'cherub,' her mouth near to his ear, so that he felt her breath in it. She put the tip of her tongue quickly twice into his ear.

'All right,' Robinson said fiercely, 'all right.'

They turned off the promenade and walked a few yards down a side street. The woman fumbled in her bag for the key. The garden of the house was wildly over-grown, the bushes lunging out over the low wall, and the wet, glistening grass overhanging the path.

'Cherub, are you coming up?' the woman said. 'You're coming up, aren't you, cherub?'

AFTER a night's moderate drinking Carr invariably felt well in the morning. His sleep was deeper, his dreams better assimilated, and when he awoke it was like waking from the unconscious sleep of childhood, with the events of the previous day tucked well below the mind's surface, a voluntary effort being required to capture more than their general flavour.

In thirty-nine years he had developed a number of protective techniques to destroy the worms of discontent, self-reproach and kindred maladies of the spirit. The morning ritual was such a discipline: the throwing off of the bed-clothes, the deep breaths at the open window, during which he resolutely avoided thinking of the happenings of the night before, the prospects of the day to come, unless either were unusually pleasant.

The other residents of the private hotel rose earlier, and he had an uninterrupted use of the bathroom.

It was half-past nine when he went down to breakfast. Now, he treated his landlady with an ironic courtesy. She was the only woman he had slept with on more than one occasion since coming to this town. The privilege of his later breakfasts had derived from their romance; it was maintained through habit.

She was still in a dressing-gown, her hair unbrushed. To Carr's brisk 'Good-morning, Mrs. Hammond', she responded with a wordless murmur.

'The fog's cleared away, I see,' Carr said, as he collected the newspapers from about the room.

He glanced through the papers as he ate his breakfast. After the toast and marmalade he lit a cigarette, and went upstairs to the lavatory. It was only at this stage of the morning that he permitted himself to begin thinking.

On his way to the office, he thought, as he had so often

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before: 'I wonder how much I miss through getting out so late, of what sensations I deprive myself! The natural beginning of a day is people scurrying to work, shopgirls putting down the shutters, steps being scrubbed.'

It was a mild, lethargic morning, with the sun gleaming faintly through the thin cloud that covered the sky entirely. In the main street a few shoppers were already abroad.

Carr nodded or said 'good morning' to two or three acquaintances, allowed his eyes to linger on anonymous woman shapes, breathed deeply, went into a tobacconist's for some cigarettes, dodged the queue outside the fish-mongers.

As soon as he entered the reporters' room he knew something was up. Sisley, the chief reporter, was on the telephone, the news editor, Craig, was standing by him, and the others were listening.

'Yes, yes,' Sisley was saying, taking notes on a scrap pad. 'No. I'll do that. You stay down there. Just a minute.' Turning to the boy, Frank: 'Get hold of one of the photographers before they go out.' Reverting to the telephone: 'Yes, that's right, Lionel. I've got it. Forty-two. Davies has gone down, I suppose. Who's with him? Yes. Good. I see. I see. Right . . .'

'What's the flap?' Carr whispered to Horsley.

'A murder,' Horsley said. He was an excitable, enthusiastic young man. 'We've got a murder. A woman. Lionel's just phoned from court.'

Sisley put down the receiver and disposed his forces.

To Carr he said, 'You've got some pals down there, Derek. Go down to the station and see what you can pick up.'

In the street again, under the same sky. On just such a morning as this, Carr thought, in another decade, in another town, he had walked to a certain place to see for the first time his first-(and only, last?) born, and the

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daffodils on the window-sill, and the dark nurse with the Kerry accent. Outside the red-brick Nonconformist chapel he paused to exchange a few words with a man with whom he had once played snooker.

The constable in the enquiry office was unknown to Carr, but he evidently recognized the reporter. There was a challenging ring about his 'Well', and Carr donned his professional mask, combining a suppliant's humility with careless bonhomie.

Carr said, 'Is Sergeant Holmes about?'

'He's gone out,' the constable replied firmly.

He began to pull about some papers on the desk in front of him.

'On the murder?' Carr asked tentatively.

'Aye. I thought you lot would be round soon,' the constable said. 'How should I know where he's gone? They don't tell us where they're going.'

'Carr, from the *Post*,' Carr said quickly. 'Look, old man, I know you can't tell me much. The Super's given us the address. I just want her name, who she is, how they found her. Just to have something to work on.'

'McCarless,' the constable said, busier than ever with his papers. 'Jean McCarless.'

'Miss, Mrs?'

'You want to know everything!' the constable said, looking up. 'Always the bloody same.'

'Do you know how old she is?' Carr asked, already feeling bored.

'Oh, she's a young tart,' the constable replied, with the trace of a Sunday newspaper reader's delight. 'A sex crime for you, or doesn't the *Post* go in for that?'

'You know us,' Carr said absently. 'The family newspaper. Is she known?'

The constable picked up a file and slapped it down on the desk.

'I've told you all I know,' he said. 'If the Super wants you to know anything else, no doubt he'll tell you.'

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'Thank you very much,' Carr said.

He telephoned the office. 'Her name's Jean McCarless. You'd better have a look in the cemetery, but I don't think we'll have anything. I'm going down there.'

A red-brick, four-storey house, undistinguished, and almost indistinguishable from all the others in that street, except that the garden had long been untended, and among the newly-painted boarding-houses its shabby, peeling woodwork threw out a challenge of indifference. Where once there had been flower-beds, the grass was taller, more rank than on what was intended as a lawn. The path to the front door had cracked, and grass and weeds grew in the gaps. Lace curtains, mostly grey, hung at all the windows.

Less fuss than if a butcher's boy had been knocked off his bicycle. A constable, red-faced, stood by the gate, ignoring the importunities of young Horsley; two women in their kitchen clothes, and an elderly man, with a wart on his cheek, without collar or tie; on the opposite corner, thirty or forty yards away, three nurses from the nearby hospital whispered and giggled; an ambulance and two police cars. Craven, the *Post* photographer, sat on a low wall further down the street, smoking.

Another constable in uniform and a plain-clothes man were standing at the door of the house, and Sisley, with his flattering air of interested sincerity, like an ambitious doctor, was talking to them.

Carr went to the wall and made a sign to Sisley. 'Her name's Jean McCarless. Young. That's about all I've got.'

'Yes, I know,' Sisley said.

'What do you want me to do? I've told the office.'

'You'd better hang about. Holmes is here. He's a pal of yours.'

'He won't talk while the Super's about.'

'You'd better wait anyway,' Sisley said. 'I can't stay here all day. I'll have to get back to the office. I'll take you off the diary. She was strangled.'

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Carr joined the photographer and lit a cigarette. The nurses walked away, casting glances behind them. An errand boy on a bicycle stopped, and a young woman in slacks, with a small brown dog, joined the group at the gate. The dog lifted its leg against the wall.

Evans, a freelance journalist, came down the street, almost running, his note-book already in his hand.

'What's the strength of it?' he asked Carr.

Carr disliked Evans, chiefly for his assertiveness. 'I understand a woman's been murdered,' he replied, uncertain whether or not he intended irony. Relenting, he added: 'The name's Jean McCarless. No. 42.'

Evans scribbled in his book and went on, walking into the garden past the constable on the gate as if he were not there.

'Twat,' Craven said.

Two more women, one pushing a pram, had joined the group, and at the windows of the houses opposite faces were pressed against the glass.

'I've taken one of the house,' the photographer said, 'and I'll get the Super coming out. But a house is a house. There's damn-all to it.'

The door of the house opened; a detective came out and spoke to the constable at the door. The little crowd pushed forward, and the dog ran into the garden yapping.

The ambulance men carried the stretcher down the steps, and the dog ran up to them, jumping at their legs. The sheet covered the body tightly, so that the outlines of the feet and where the arms had been crossed over the stomach were severely defined. The baby in the pram started to cry.

'I could get one of the stiff,' the photographer said, 'but they wouldn't use it.'

The constable at the gate grew more red-faced. He repeated ineffectually, 'Stand back. Stand back.'

As the stretcher was carried over the pavement to the ambulance the spectators pushed still closer. The super-

intendent, following the stretcher, regarded them with arrogant disdain. Behind him Evans was gesticulating angrily, and the dog started to bark again as the ambulance drove away.

'Any statement, Super?' Carr said deferentially.

Craven clicked his camera and the superintendent straightened his shoulders.

'There'll be a press conference at three o'clock.'

'I must have something before then,' Evans said, waving his note-book, 'for the lunch-time editions.'

The superintendent ignored him and stepped into the police car which drove off.

Carr went into the garden. 'Hullo, tosh,' he said to the detective who had preceded the stretcher out of the house. He was a short, muscular man, with a creased face, bland as butter, and long streaks of hair carefully brushed over a bald crown. He smiled distractedly to Carr.

'What's to do?' Carr said.

'Strangled. Neighbour found her in bed this morning. Bare as the day she was born. Red-head. Comes from Tyneside somewhere. Not a native. Been here two years.'

'Any chance of seeing the room?'

'Imposs. I've got to go off now. Enquiries. I'll see you later.'

Carr lit another cigarette, and looked at his watch. Sisley had returned to the office. If Craven were still outside he would ask him to come for a drink. He walked down to the gate, where, now the body had been removed, the constraint of the little crowd had relaxed. The baby was still crying.

'It's always the bad ones who end like that,' a woman was saying. She was old but there were two splashes of colour high on her cheeks. 'I know. I've seen them. Different men every night. And who kept her? Mrs., she called herself, but no-one never saw no husband. He wasn't her husband. And drink.'

'Did you know her?' Carr said.

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'Aye, I knowed her,' the old woman replied. 'I've seen her. They all end like that. The dirty sluts.'

'God is not mocked,' she added unexpectedly.

Craven had gone. 'God is not mocked,' Carr thought, a little sadly, as he walked back along the promenade, where the long grey stretch of sand curled into the distant mist. 'And do my pretences also fail to deceive?' He continued to think unhappily of the wasted years behind, the frightening years ahead, until he turned into the doorway of a pub.

'I was resolved that the Borough Engineer be instructed to prepare plans for . . .' Martin Robinson put down his pen. Hargreaves, who shared the office with him, had gone out. To be alone was a positive physical relief; other people's eyes were a continual irritant, their scrutiny compelling unremitting concentration. His face, he felt, was too articulate; left ungagged, it would shout out its confessions of shame, like a repentant sinner at an evangelist meeting. One could never relax except in solitude or in darkness.

That morning when his mother had come into his room to wake him, instinctively he had turned the tell-tale face into the pillows. He had risen too late to have breakfast; but at lunch the eyes—his mother's persistent, shrewd, his father's sceptical, brusquely indifferent, his sister's changing like the sky from the brightness of curiosity to clouded self-absorption—had been unavoidable.

'What time did you come in last night, Martin?' his mother had asked casually, as she served the potatoes.

The informer face flushing as he replied, equally casually, 'About one, I think.'

'I heard the car pull up,' his mother had said, 'but I didn't look at the time. Was it a taxi?'

She had meant him to know that she knew it had been three o'clock. He had felt her eyes and his sister's eyes.

'Yes, I'd been back to a chap's place.'

He had felt the absence of his father's eyes.

Now, alone in the office, with the typewriters' chatter and the murmur of voices from the chief clerk's room clearly audible through the thin partition, he pressed his hands on his face, working his finger-tips against his forehead and eyes, the palms covering his cheeks.

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When the telephone rang he lifted the receiver with his left hand, his head still supported by his other arm.

Would he please come to the Town Clerk's office?

He had no especial apprehensions—his work, in fact, was almost the only one of his activities in which he had a constant confidence—yet, after replacing the receiver, he sat on for a moment, reluctant to face the world again.

There were two men with the Town Clerk, standing.

'Oh, Robinson.' Mr. Bagshott spoke almost apologetically, keeping his eyes on the table in front of him. 'These—er—two gentlemen are—um—police officers. They tell me they—er, er—would like to have a few words with you privately.' He looked up at the shorter of the two men. 'Sergeant Holmes—ah—he suggested that . . .' He broke off.

'Nowhere suitable here, Mr. Bagshott says,' said the detective. 'Wonder if you'd care to come down to our office. Car outside. More convenient for us.'

'Yes, that's it,' the Town Clerk said with what sounded like relief. 'You needn't come back this afternoon, Robinson.' He blew his nose vigorously.

Instantly the word 'police' had been mentioned, in a simple association of ideas, involving a vague childish sense of naughtiness, Robinson had thought of the woman. Beyond that he did not think.

In the police car he said, with a painful attempt at off-handedness: 'What's it all about?'

'Don't worry. Just a few questions. Better wait till we get to the office,' the detective to whom the Town Clerk had referred as Sergeant Holmes said affably.

It was an office much like any other office. It might have been a room in the Town Hall. Robinson noticed the figure of an almost nude girl on a wall calendar, and, on a shelf propping up some books with plain covers, a single boxing glove.

'Ah, here we are,' the sergeant said. 'Take a seat, will you?'

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He himself sat down at the desk, facing the chair which he had pulled out for Robinson. The other man remained somewhere behind Robinson, near the door. The window, which he was facing, was open at the top. In the yard of the fire station adjoining, a physical training class was in progress; the voice of the instructor entered the narrow room, clearly, intimately—'One, two, three, in; one, two, three, out.'

And after all it was what he had expected.

'Yes, I do know her,' Robinson said.

'Saw her last night, didn't you?'

'No, yes. Yes, I did. In the Gresham.'

'That's right. Went home with her?'

'Yes. Look here, what's it all about?'

'She ask you up for a drink or anything?'

'No,' Robinson said hurriedly. 'No, I left her at the gate.'

'You did? That's good,' said the sergeant.

'Look, what's it all about? Has Jean done anything?'

'What time would it have been when you left her?'

'Eleven, no, half-past-ten, about.'

'That's good,' the sergeant said again. 'As far as he can tell, the doc. says she was killed about two, three o'clock.'

A frozen instant of time. Robinson found his eyes were traversing the room, seeking the other boxing glove. At the same time he realized a slow hissing sound was coming from his mouth. 'Up, down, up, down, up, down,' came the voice of the instructor.

'She,' he began, but his voice was too high, and he broke off. He felt his mouth moving and instinctively put up a hand to cover it. Another man came into the room but stayed behind him. 'Up, down, up, down, up.'

His mind began to work again, with an automatic craftiness. 'You say she has been killed?' the incredulity marked by the rising inflection, but to himself his voice sounded quite unreal.

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'Great shock. Very sorry,' the detective said. 'You were very fond of her?'

'Yes, no. Well, quite.'

'Knew her well? Old friend?'

'No, just, she . . .'

'Yes?'

'I'd met her in the Gresham.'

'How long ago?'

'Three months about.'

'Had you been intimate with her?' the detective said, almost with distaste.

'No, no of course not,' trying to indicate some sort of indignation.

'But you'd been up to her room?'

'Oh, no.'

'What time was it you said you left her?'

'I'm sorry. That wasn't true. I have been up to her room.' Truth should always be improved with the modifying lie: 'Just twice, or perhaps three times.'

'Last night?'

Robinson hesitated. 'No,' he said. 'I left her about half-past ten. You see, we'd stayed at the Gresham till it shut and just walked back.'

Confidence, or something that resembled it, began slowly to ebb back. Yet already he had an inkling of that which he was to realize more acutely after he had left this grim, negative room—that he had entered new and dangerous depths, where his imaginary adolescent dragons had become actual.

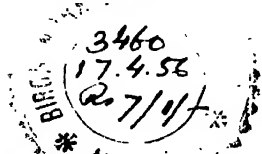
'Look, how was she . . .?'

'She was strangled by someone's hands, then with a stocking,' the detective said deliberately. 'She was naked on the floor when she was found.'

Robinson recalled a delicious erotic image. He flushed.

'Yes, I know. Terrible,' the detective said. 'Had she said anything? Was she expecting anyone?'

It was still there. He was by the door; she lay on the



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bed, white, ripe, awesome, her hair spread over the pillows, her green eyes tauntingly on him. 'Cherub . . .' The first time!

'No, no, I don't think so. She didn't say anything.'

'What do you know about her? No, as you were. Have the night squared up first. When did you meet her?'

'About nine o'clock.'

'In the Gresham?'

'Yes. In the lounge.'

'By arrangement?'

'Well, I said I might see her there.'

'When?'

'Well, I was late . . .'

'No, I mean when did you make the arrangement?'

'I forget. No, no. I'd seen her at the week-end.'

'At the Gresham?'

'Yes.'

'Right. Go on. You met her nine o'clock. Anyone with her?'

'No.'

'Anyone with you?'

'No. I was alone.'

'Did she speak to anyone?'

'Yes,' Robinson said slowly. 'Yes, there was a man. His name's Louie. He's a Jew, I think. He's a canvasser for the pools or something.'

'She knew him?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Nothing said about meeting him?'

'No, no. I don't think so.'

'Sure? What did they talk about?'

'Nothing much. He told a story, a joke.'

'How long did he stay with you?'

'Oh, only a few minutes?'

'Good, well, we'll go on,' the detective said. 'No, as you were. Would you like a cup of tea?'

'It doesn't matter,' Robinson said. 'Really . . .'

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'Well, I want one.' The detective smiled briefly. 'Excuse me,' getting up. 'Have a cigarette,' he said, pushing his case at Robinson as he passed.

Robinson took one, and the other detective, who remained in the room, came forward with a light as the sergeant went out.

Dominant in Robinson's mind was the white luxurious image, to which all thoughts, all beginnings of thoughts, irresistibly led. 'Cherub!'

The press conference was held in a room adjoining one of the courts. Evans was already there when Carr arrived, talking volubly to three other men, whom Carr assumed—with some disquietude—to be representatives of national newspapers. Two other reporters were quietly exchanging notes at the back of the room. Carr sat down with them, opening a library book—an Agate *Ego*—which he read until the Chief Constable and the superintendent came in.

'Good afternoon, Mr. Chief,' Evans said.

'Good afternoon, gentlemen.'

The Chief Constable sat at a table with the superintendent standing by his shoulder. He began to read from a typed paper.

'At 10.10 this morning the police were notified that the body of a woman, known as Mrs. Jean McCarless, was found in the bedroom of the flat she occupied at No. 42 St. James Street. The discovery was made by the occupant of the neighbouring flat, Mrs. Lily Flowers, who immediately communicated with the police. Superintendent Davies accompanied by Detective Sergeant Holmes and other officers went to the premises. The body of the deceased was lying on the floor; it was unclothed. A stocking was tied around the neck which was bruised. There were no other marks of violence. After an examination by the police surgeon, who stated that death appeared to have been caused by asphyxiation due to strangulation, the

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body was removed by ambulance to the borough mortuary. The deceased is believed to be about 28 years of age and a native of Durham. She had been living at No. 42 St. James Street for about two years. She is understood to have been married, and to have a husband, James McCarless, living in the Tyneside area. He, and anyone else who can give any information, is asked to communicate with the police, who are continuing enquiries.

'Well, that's it, gentlemen,' the Chief Constable said.

'Was the stocking nylon or silk?' asked one of the national newspapermen.

'Was anything missing?'

'How did this Mrs. Flowers come to find the body?'

Carr yawned, opened the *Ego* at random.

'Mr. Chief, can you say what lines the police are working on?' Evans asked.

The Chief Constable looked at the superintendent, who shrugged.

'A number of persons have been interviewed,' the Chief Constable said, 'and the police are continuing their enquiries.'

He rose. 'The press will be notified, gentlemen, when there are any further developments to report.' The superintendent whispered to him. 'Oh, yes. The inquest will be opened at 3 p.m. tomorrow.'

'The nylon murder,' one of the national reporters said as he hurried out. He had a nasal London-suburban accent. Carr looked at him with distaste, grimaced, sighed, and followed the others out into the street, marking with a finger his place in the *Ego*.

'Sorry to have been so long,' the sergeant had said, smiling.

'Well, we'll get on with it.'

The questioning had continued. The physical training class had ended; through the window came only the

quiet, ordinary sounds of passing vehicles, birds. Once the detective came from behind Robinson to kill a bluebottle that buzzed and bullied itself against the window. He had used a folded newspaper, and the insect had fallen on to the sill, quite dead, though, watching it, Robinson had thought for a time that it still lived because its antennae quivered delicately in the draught. Later, although it was not dark, the light was switched on, painting the room a glabrous yellow.

'We want your help,' the sergeant had said mildly.

The questions had proceeded on different lines.

'Tell us about her, who she knew, what she did, what sort of woman she was.'

Robinson was surprised to find how little he really had known of the woman. Nugatory to tell of the birthmark on her thigh, the purplish nipples, the redness of her hair against her body, all the physical, intimate individualities through which she had existed most potently for him. And he lacked the words with which to convey the significance of her taunting laugh that had hurt, yet without wounding; her outbursts of vivacity, that excited and frightened, like a gale; or the more frequent surrenders to listless indifference when, it seemed, she had escaped from him into a void; or her unexpected, bird-like curiosity when faced with something outside her experience; or that acceptance of a brief, untrappy mortality which—it appeared to him now—had been prescient of her disastrous death.

He knew, he told the detective, that a man named Eddie had maintained her. He thought he came from Liverpool, or it might have been Manchester. Sundays he had usually come over, and Thursdays. She had never mentioned his other name. 'No, no. Yes, I'm sure. She did once, something about owning some cafés. Yes, yes.'

Or: her husband? 'Yes, I knew. Jimmy, I think. No, she never said where.'

It had continued. More tea had been poured out. The detective's voice had come to assume for Robinson the

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reassurance of the familiar, so that the questions were preferable to the occasional silences.

At the end he had returned to the subject of Robinson's own relations with the woman, his own movements. The detective also examined closely a cut on the back of the boy's left hand, questioned him about his finances, his habits and his unextraordinary history.

Now, walking unseeingly along the main street, among the crowds leaving the cinema matinees, office workers, making for bus queues or the electric trains, he tried to recall the contradictions and inconsistencies in his answers.

He had been asked to sign a statement—for the coroner, Mr. Robinson—as the last person known to have seen her alive, excepting the man who killed her, of course. And the fingerprints. Reasonable, no doubt, the detective's explanation. He had admitted visiting her room, and it was necessary prints should be taken of all who were known to have been there. 'Then if we find another set . . .' the detective had said. Yet the act of pressing down his fingers, the powder, with associations of detective novels, films, court reports, had been the culminating point of his ordeal, marking how far he had strayed from the path of respectability into exotic jungles of threat and trial.

He recalled, crossing the road instinctively to the stop at which he customarily caught his bus home—he recalled, with more shame than he had felt for the lies, the confession of a discreditable relationship, how he had nearly broken down then, wept, discarded the lies and evasions.

With an almost physical effort, he wrenched his mind away from that demoralizing recollection. He was standing at the bus stop. At the front of the queue were Mr. and Mrs. Fisher, from the dramatic society, and behind them Ann Porter, who lived in the next street. They were inhabitants of another country, and Robinson instinctively felt a kind of contempt for them, such as a man who

has travelled the dangerous places of the world might feel towards those who had remained at home content with domestic bliss.

He realized that he could not endure facing his parents. He left the bus queue and walked to a telephone kiosk.

'Oh, Mother. I've got to work late tonight. I don't quite know when I'll be back. I'm seeing Alice after. Yes, keep it for me; I'll warm it up.'

It was almost dark. The street lamps were on and the shop windows lit. The roads were turbulent with an impatient activity—cars, buses, erect cyclists, pedestrians hurrying to the autumn womb of home. The sky was a very dark purple-blue. Somewhere a child let off a firework, although it was still several weeks to Guy Fawkes Day.

Robinson bought three evening papers, and—because no alternative presented itself to him—went to the Gresham.

He had not previously been in so early. The men's bar was crowded with businessmen who had dropped in for one on their way home or before dinner, relaxed and expansive, and a few couples sat at the tables off the hallway, but the vast lounge was almost deserted, and it was oddly peaceful. The band would not arrive for another two hours. Two men at the bar were talking with the barman about horses; a third was quietly reading a newspaper.

The barman, cheerful in the calm, and consequently polite, said, 'Good evening, sir,' as Robinson came up, and it was as if now he had been initiated into this milieu, had graduated as an equal with the barman, the men talking horses, and those who would come in later—the knowing ones who moved with assurance in the world of bars, horses, women and, even, detectives.

The papers contained brief reports of the murder. It was only as he started to read that Robinson wondered with alarm whether his name would be mentioned. It was not.

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He had sat instinctively at the opposite side of the room from that at which he had been with the woman. It was when he saw the barman indicating the table at which they had sat, at which she always had sat, that he knew they were talking of the murder. He could not hear their words. At first he felt self-conscious and was afraid the barman might recognize him as her companion of the previous evening, but when no sign was made in his direction he experienced a perverse sensation of superiority, pride.

A couple came in and sat far away in a dim recess of the lounge. Robinson bought another drink. A man wearing a brown shirt entered and joined the others at the bar. A waiter walked over and stood with them.

When Robinson went for his third drink the man in the brown shirt looked hard at him. The waiter was talking: 'Whisky it was, always was, for her, whisky and just a chaser now and again, and every time have one yourself, Charley . . .'

Robinson counted the silver in his pocket and ordered a whisky.

As he walked back to his table he felt the eyes on his back, and knew, as certainly as if he had heard the words, that the man in the brown shirt had said, 'See that fellow . . .'

He was a man to be singled out. See that fellow! He lit a cigarette deliberately and with a certain flourish—using the lighter Alice had given him for his birthday—then picked up his paper again, but held it this time below the level of his face.

When he left he said, 'Good night', casually, easily, to the barman. Their eyes were on his back again as he walked across the room. See that fellow! Already there was a woman sitting alone by the steps, and he regarded her boldly as he passed.

Alice was waiting for him by the War Memorial. Although there were other girls there and men, also waiting for their partners, he saw her from thirty yards away, and

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immediately he felt irritated and sluggish. It was a sensation similar to that one experienced leaving a cinema at which the film had been absorbing, to come out into the commonplace streets, diminishing one's stature.

She was looking primly, smugly downwards, in an attitude intended to convey that she was waiting for one and one alone. Around her head she wore a scarf decorated with the name-signs of Parisian nightclubs. It made her look very young.

'For heaven's sake, why are you wearing a scarf round your head?' Robinson said immediately as he came up to her. 'It's not cold.'

'Hullo,' the girl said. 'I was early. When I was waiting for the bus Mr. Hepplewhite came up in his car—wasn't it nice of him?—and stopped and asked me if I was coming into town, and . . .'

The scarf, covering her hair, her ears, her throat and neck, took all character from her face. She spoke quickly, her pretty lip-sticked mouth parting to show sharp, white teeth. 'She could have been anyone's girl.'

She took his arm as if by proprietary right, and again Robinson felt his irritation rising. He did not look at her as they walked among the dead leaves.

'Where are we going?' the girl asked.

'Look, Alice, I don't fancy the pictures tonight.'

'All right,' the girl said.

'Look, I'm broke,' turning to her for the first time. 'Have you any money? Can you lend me some?'

'Yes, I've got some. Do you want to go for a drink?' If the girl noticed his mood, she gave no indication.

When they drank together they always went to a quiet hotel on the promenade.

'Good, our room's empty,' the girl said.

When he had ordered the drinks—a beer and a shandy—she slipped a pound note into his hand while the waiter's back was turned.

He scarcely listened to her chatter. This was the other

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world, safe and familiar, but not a man's country, dull, featureless.

'We're not just drinking all night, are we?' the girl said. 'It's not eight o'clock yet.'

'We'll move on later.'

He thought again of the dead woman, and, for the first time, experienced a sharp sense of loss. No pity. It was almost as if she were culpable in being killed, depriving him for ever of the intense ecstasies of the flesh to which she had introduced him. He thought steadily: she is dead; never again shall I see her white, never again shall I feel her body moving with mine.

He interrupted the girl. 'You've told me that before.'

He felt a need for action, movement. 'This place is dead. Let's move on.'

'I haven't finished it yet, Martin,' the girl said, and, for the first time revealing awareness of the edge to his temper, 'What's the matter with you tonight?'

He would not look at her. 'Nothing. Nothing's the matter. I'm just bored. I'm just bored with sitting in the same places and doing the same things. I'm . . . Oh, this pub's dead, anyway. I'll have another while you're finishing that.'

He went to the bar and fetched himself a whisky. The girl had never seen him drink spirits before except at parties or at Christmas.

Robinson suddenly recalled the story the Jew, Hyams, had told. 'Listen,' he said, laughing, 'I heard a good story . . .'

It was more crude than any he had told her before. He finished his whisky. 'Come on. Leave that if you don't want it.'

He led her down a cobbled side-street to a small ale-house, more or less respectable but rawly proletarian.

'We're not going to spend the night drinking, are we?' the girl said again, when he returned to her from the bar. They were standing at the foot of some stairs.

'Oh, for heaven's sake! Don't keep on. You don't have

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to drink if you don't want to, but I do. You always keep on. Why shouldn't we spend the night drinking? Other people do. If you don't want . . . '

She had been bending to put her glass on the stairs against the wall. Straightening, she said, 'I think I had better go home, Martin. It's no use when you're like this.'

They had quarrelled before, enjoyably, each playing the proper part, observing the rules, neither making the unforgivable remark, with the scenes building up to a pleasurable climax of tender reconciliation. This could follow the same pattern.

'No,' Robinson said.

Now he would not let her go. Travellers like to take with them on their journeys something that belongs to the safe domestic homeland—books, a gramophone record, a photograph. She should go through it with him, he thought with a vague anger.

'You're too safe, Alice, too careful,' he said, without knowing quite what he meant, feeling only the urge to create emotion, violence, an external response to his inner agitation. 'You don't know what it's all about. Don't be such a prig!'

'No, I'm going home,' she said, modifying the remark by stopping to pick up her glass again.

'You are not going home. It's time you learned. There are things going on you don't . . . ' He laughed. 'Have you seen the papers tonight? There was a girl murdered here, here in this very town. You wouldn't think it, would you? Come on.' With a gesture that might have been friendly he gripped her elbow, squeezing out a little charm. 'Come on. Let's see life.'

The girl smiled uncertainly. A new design was being formed; she was feeling her way.

'I don't call murders life,' she said. 'Who was she, where was it?'

Robinson emptied his glass. The girl put down hers, unfinished, on the stairs.

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'We'll go and have one in the Gresham,' he said, as they went out into the street.

The trees were bare against the reeling stars. Should he tell her? There was a part of him that wanted to boast of his relations with the dead woman, to show this respectable girl by his side that he was a man of the world, of the Gresham, kept women.

'Oh, I don't know,' he said, staggering a little. 'It's in the papers. Not a local woman. She lived in St. James Street. She was strangled with a stocking.'

'I thought perhaps you wanted me to be murdered,' the girl said.

He seldom appreciated her occasional flashes of irony. 'What? What's that?'

'Just to make life,' she said. 'I thought that's what you meant by life.'

'I don't get it.'

She was still uncertain and had not taken his arm. He walked quickly, with his hands deep in his mackintosh pockets. He was wondering whether he regretted proposing the Gresham. The image of the lounge fascinated but yet intimidated him.

'Must we go to the Gresham?' the girl said. 'You know what a reputation it's got.'

She had decided it. 'Reputation,' he sneered. 'That's all you think about; that's all they all think about. Reputation!'

But at the entrance to the hotel he felt sudden qualms. He turned his disquiet into a conciliatory gesture: 'All right. We won't go up in the lounge if you don't want to,' he said. 'We'll go in one of the side rooms. It's quieter there, better for your reputation.'

There were only three other people in the room. They did not even look up as Robinson and the girl entered. Robinson's head was beginning to ache. The girl declined to drink and he ordered a beer for himself.

'What sort of a woman was she?' the girl asked.

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'I don't know,' Robinson said sullenly, his physical discomfort reproducing itself in his mind. 'How should I know? I only know what's in the papers.'

'I think there's a man who wants to speak to you,' the girl said.

Hyams stood at the door of the room. Even after Robinson had turned and looked at him he continued to gesticulate. His face was split by a wide, ingratiating smile.

Robinson went over to him quickly. The Jew's eyes were muddy and the skin of his face was blotched. As he spoke he gave the impression of continuing to grin.

'What a bloody carry-on, old man! What a do! Have the D's been on to you? They were at me for over an hour this afternoon. Anyone would have thought I'd been exceeding the speed limit.'

'Yes, I've seen them, too,' Robinson said. He felt angry because he had whispered, and he added too loudly, 'What did you tell them?'

'What could I tell them, old man?'

'Did you tell them about me?'

'I don't know your name,' Hyams said, with a suggestion of interrogation. 'I said I saw her with a fellow in here last night.'

'She hadn't told you about me?'

'Told me? I'm not with you. Did the D's mention me to you?'

'I said you'd sat with us.' Robinson added pleadingly, 'Look, will they get who did it? Who did do it?'

'Well, we've got nothing to worry about,' Hyams said, the rictus of his grin becoming wider. 'Why should you worry? Just your little bit of fun, wasn't she? Who'd worry about a bint like that? Pebbles on the beach, eh?' Then he added with apparent sincerity, 'She was a damned good kid. It's a bloody shame. Poor old Jean.'

'Yes, yes,' Robinson said. 'Look, I've got to be off. We'll have a drink some time.'

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‘That’s right,’ Hyams said affably, looking at the girl. ‘I’ll be around. I’m always around.’

‘Who was that?’ the girl asked.

‘Oh, just a chap. He . . . he’s . . . Come on, I’ve had enough.’

He felt heavy, inert, his mind rebelling against further thought, as the body will revolt after excessive labour.

‘I won’t come back with you tonight,’ he said. ‘I’ll see you on your bus.’

She kissed him once briefly before her bus came, but he did not respond. After she had gone he caught his own bus. The lights were on downstairs at his home, and he walked round and round the block until they were extinguished before going in.

CARR recognized the photograph instantly. It had been touched up, and her teeth were showing as in an advertisement for a dentifrice. *The murdered woman and her husband, James McCarless, after their marriage in Gateshead in August, 1942*, the caption read.

He saw her as she had been in the Gresham, the shoe slowly swinging up and down.

This morning Mrs. Hammond was dressed. There was powder on her face. 'Have they got anyone yet?' she said from behind Carr.

'No, not yet, no,' he answered absently; then added, 'They want to find her husband and the man who kept her. They've interviewed a man she was with the last night.'

The landlady seemed reluctant to leave him. 'Where would the paper have got the picture from—the police?'

'No, no. Gateshead somewhere,' pouring out a second cup of tea.

'She looks pretty on it.'

'Yes.'

'I think I've seen her about town.'

'Oh, yes, have you?' picking up another paper.

'You got your letter?' the landlady said, her voice casual.

'Yes, yes, thank you. I did, Mrs. Hammond.'

'I think I've seen her at Fordhams, getting the rations.'

'Yes.'

A thin bar of sunlight shone suddenly through one of the side windows, and the smoke from his cigarette was violet within it.

'It was from your wife, wasn't it?' she said.

Carr inhaled deeply, tasting the smoke in his chest. 'I have no wife,' he said slowly, articulating each word clearly, as if to a foreigner.

'Well, you know what I mean.'

Carr rose. 'Yes, I know what you mean.'

'How's Carol?' the woman said quickly.

'She's very well, thank you,' Carr replied as he went out.

In his room he read the letter again.

Dear Derek,

I am sorry to have been so long in replying, but I am rather busy these days and it's difficult to find time. At least, I suppose I do have the time, but then I generally am tired and not in the mood for writing.

You ask how things are going with me. I suppose the proper answer is 'quite well, thank you'. I am making more money now and I think there is a fairly assured market for all I can turn out—for the time being, anyway. So, so far as that goes I have nothing to worry about.

As you can see we are still at this place, and I haven't found anywhere else yet. I have been to look at several flats, but either they are too expensive or quite unsuitable in some other way.

Carol had a bad cold a few weeks ago and was very throaty afterwards. I thought it might be tonsils, but it has cleared up. I am relieved as, though she is much less nervous now, an operation would have been an ordeal to her. Mrs. Kilner is very good with her.

I do not go out a great deal in the evenings. About once a week I see D. and we usually go to the pictures. Joseph and Methilde usually come over once a week, too, and at week-ends I go over to Golder's Green. I haven't seen Johnnie for several weeks now. The last time was by chance in the Tate.

I don't know whether I have answered your letter properly. There is not very much I can write about you from what you write.

You seem to be fairly settled—I do not write that bitterly. I am glad you enjoyed your holiday in Austria. Did you have a week or a fortnight? I hope they wineed and dined you well.

Well, Derek, as I said, I am sorry to have been so long in

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writing, but really there doesn't seem to be much point, does there?

*All the best, Derek,
Yvonne.*

It was a bustling, scurrying morning, and although there had been a little rain, the road shining in dark, lucent patches, the falling leaves were being blown along the pavements. A sharp smell, like iodine, came from the estuary. Low, white clouds scudded across a background of higher, darker cumulus, and in between there were patches of sky, hedgesparrow-egg-blue. In the gardens a man and a boy were flying a kite.

Carr could not separate the two images; they dissolved into each other like a film fade. Yvonne in the dark wood-lined room, sketching, her tongue between her lips, looking over the chimneys; the woman in the Gresham, fermentative, her bared heel like an apple.

Carr struggled for release, disturbed, and conscious, with a wry self-disgust, of his uneasiness. He did not enjoy his walk to the office.

It was a slack day. He typed some copy, read some hand-outs, looked idly out of the window. Then he telephoned Holmes at the police station.

'Well, I haven't much time. Meet you in the Unicorn at twelve.'

They stood at the bar. The pub was empty, the barman indifferently polishing glasses. The sun shone against the bottles and the mirrors.

'You know who she was with the night before, I imagine,' Carr said. 'I saw her.'

'Did you now?'

'A young fellow, Martin Robinson, a Corporation clerk. I suppose it was he you interviewed.'

'Among others.'

'Why,' said Carr, rhetorically, 'should a single violent death still charm, even after . . . ?'

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'What,' the detective interrupted him, 'what would you imagine was the relationship between them?'

'Well, that was the only time I had seen them. Intimate, I think. Yes, you might say intimate.'

'Did they look as if they were on the point of going to bed together?'

Carr remembered her polite, disinterested smile. 'Yes, I think one might say that,' he said. 'But I don't know,' he added, feeling to his surprise a slight embarrassment. 'I might be wrong. George, you know I don't let you down. I'm not seeking a story in particular, but just how are things going?'

'We're continuing enquiries,' the detective said.

'Come off it,' Carr said. 'Just because you're on a murder instead of looking for a stolen bicycle.'

The detective shrugged. 'We've seen Robinson; we've seen Hyams—did you see Hyams with them?'

'Yes, for a minute or two.'

'Yes. We're trying to trace her husband. At one time he was a sailor, we know. He might be at sea now. And the fellow who kept her. We know his name, but he's an elusive character—might be anywhere.'

'No arrest imminent?'

'The police have every hope of making an early arrest,' the detective said, mocking.

'What about young what's-his-name, Robinson?'

'Robinson. Says he saw her home, left her at the gate.'

'And . . . ?'

The detective shrugged again. 'Well, no-one's said he didn't.' He looked at his watch. 'I must blow. Covering the inquest?'

Carr had lunch in a small café near the office. He felt dissatisfied and restless, and was puzzled by his unfamiliar desire.

The inquest was adjourned after evidence of identification and medical evidence. 'The police have further enquiries to make,' said the superintendent.

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During the afternoon it grew colder and black clouds piled up from over the sea. The rain began about six o'clock.

Robinson had scarcely spoken during the evening meal. Fortunately, his sister had told a long, involved story, which lasted until mid-way through the sweet, with many sub-plots and asides, of a scene in the typing pool.

When he went out he had no planned destination. He would not acknowledge that the Gresham pulled him like a magnet.

He had a drink at a pub near the bus stop. Despite the rain, which had settled now into a steady drizzle, he walked aimlessly, trying to fill his emptiness. The streets were almost deserted. He passed the same policeman twice.

Whether or not to enter the Gresham had become a test: he feared the lights, the knowing eyes.

So it was this I was waiting for, Carr thought, as he saw the boy, screwing up his face against the light, the noise, the rain dripping from his hat, come up the steps into the lounge.

It was a relief to Robinson when Carr stepped from those at the bar to grip him by the arm; to be not alone was safer, one was less conspicuous, isolated.

Carr was too effusive, gushing almost, conscious of his unnaturalness even while he spoke. ' . . . completely and utterly bored by my own company—a shocking confession of inadequacy, I know. You are my rescuer. We'll sit down, shall we? It's like Bedlam up here.'

Friday, pay-night, the lounge was again crowded; there were no empty tables. Carr led Robinson to a table at which only a couple were sitting. The man was elderly; he had a moustache stained yellow with nicotine; his hand was on the woman's arm, and he held his head inches from hers as he talked earnestly, looking into her eyes.

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'This will do,' Carr said. 'Romeo and Juliet are engrossed.'

The woman had a set smile, tolerant, self-satisfied, as she listened to her companion.

Carr talked rapidly but he could not hold the boy. Robinson's eyes were moving distractedly around the room. He kept putting his hand to his face, squeezing out a crease here, an itch there.

'It's a—it's a great pity about Jean, isn't it?' Carr said suddenly, biting his lower lip, looking down. 'A striking woman, striking really, pneumatic, vibrant, sensual. She had a kind of sexual magnetism, like the concubines of the Golden Age.' Then, leaning forward, looking at Robinson, with patent frankness: 'It must be damned awkward for you—with her on the night. I suppose the police have been pestering you? They would want to know everything you said, everything you did, everything you felt.'

Robinson's face had tightened. Then he picked up his glass and drank slowly, holding it to his mouth for some seconds.

'The difficulty,' Carr went on, 'must be in realizing that you—really you, you, yourself—should ever have become involved in anything so exotic, so, so archtypical, oversize as a murder. Like during the war, one just couldn't make oneself realize—one realized, of course, on a superficial level—that anything so momentous was really taking place and that one was a part of it.'

Lowering his glass, Robinson said, 'I didn't really know her very well.'

'Did you not?' Carr said. 'I thought you were . . . ' He searched for the word.

'You're a reporter. You'd know. All about how the police work, I mean,' Robinson said quickly. 'What do they do? I mean what happens next?'

'I thought you and she were, well, you know,' Carr said. 'Oh, I don't know all the police secrets.'

Robinson looked at the couple; the man had one arm

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round the back of the woman's chair, and with his other hand was playing with her fingers. Robinson leaned forward.

'Listen,' he said. 'It's damned awkward. You know I've been a bit of a fool over this. But how can you tell what's going to happen? I told them I hadn't been up to her room when I was there.'

'You mean that night?' Carr said.

'Yes, I told them I took her home and left her at the gate, but I went up.'

Carr looked at Robinson and then away again. In his concern the boy had lost his self-consciousness and his face was too revealing.

'I scarcely ever give advice,' Carr said shortly. 'But I think if I were in your shoes I'd tell them.'

'But it's not so easy. You see, I told them I hadn't been up before they told me she had been killed. They'll want to know why I didn't tell the truth then, because then there was nothing to be frightened about.'

This, Carr realized, was a repetition of an argument that had already taken place within Robinson's mind.

'... there were other things, too, I didn't quite tell the truth about. If they find I lied they'll believe all I told them was lies. I was the last to be with her and they've got to pin it on someone.'

'Oh, no,' Carr said. 'It isn't like that at all.'

'Whatever happens,' Robinson went on desperately, as if it was a relief to put all his fears into words, 'it will all come out about me and her and everything.'

'Does that matter so dreadfully?' Carr said, smiling. 'Because you went to bed with her? Perhaps it is a cause for envy.'

The face of the man with the stained moustache was even closer to the woman, and he was pleading persistently. Confession had lightened Robinson's burden, and now his avowal took the form of exhibitionism.

'I met her in here first, you know. I'd had a few and

came in here on my own. She was with some chap, but she left him and came over to me,' he boasted. 'A Saturday night, it was. We stayed here till closing time—she paid her round each time—then she took me back to her flat. She cooked a supper, and she had a bottle of whisky and we just sat there drinking it. I didn't know for sure what . . . Then she went out of the room. She, she, she called me, and when I went she was lying there . . .'

'This has gone far enough, Carr thought with shame, but from the moment he had realized that it was for Robinson he had been waiting his capacity to control events had diminished.

Robinson's eyes were shining. A lock of hair had fallen over his forehead. 'It was bloody wonderful. Honestly, I don't think . . .'

'If you've any sense at all, you'll go and tell the police all this,' Carr interrupted harshly. He thought: why am I doing this? Disgust rose within him; then, by an unconscious defence reaction, was transmuted into boredom. He yawned.

'She, such a very ordinary little woman; he, such a thumping crook,' he quoted, smiling wearily, indicating the couple who shared their table. The man was running his forefinger up and down the nape of the woman's neck.

Carr's reaction had communicated itself to Robinson. He blushed and began to raise his glass, but it was empty.

'You'll have another?' he said painfully.

'No, no,' Carr said. With an effort: 'I've got to go on. I've got to see some people. It's been extremely pleasant.'

He emptied his glass and rose.

'I, I'd like to see you again,' Robinson said shyly, looking away.

Now the stained moustache was close to her ear. This, Carr thought, with a kind of horror, is what I wanted, but I am not committed yet.

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'Well, it's Saturday tomorrow. I usually look in here on Saturday night.'

It had rained steadily most of the night but in the morning a strong wind rose which drove low black clouds over the town, and the rain came only in sudden violent squalls. The week-end shoppers thronged the pavements, pushing head-down into the wind. From the top of the bus the umbrellas looked like beetles. There was suddenly a scream. As the brakes of the bus gripped, the tyres squealed sharply, and the passengers were thrown forward. From all directions men ran to the front of the bus, converging on it like ants on an apple core.

'Oh, I think I'm going to be sick,' the girl sitting next to the window beside Carr said.

She stood up and began to push past him, but he rose too and preceded her down the steps. Something was being lifted up and carried to the pavement. Two library books, open, lay face downwards in the gutter.

The girl was trembling violently. 'Are you all right?' Carr said to her indifferently. She did not reply.

He left her standing by the platform of the bus and walked to where they were laying the injured woman on the pavement. Someone put a coat under her head. There was blood with the rain water in the gutter. The driver was leaning against the bonnet of the bus. He kept repeating, though no-one was listening: 'She walked right in front. She walked right in front.' Carr picked up the two books, shook them, closed them, and, after holding them aimlessly in his hand for a moment, put them down on the pavement.

The girl was very white when he went back to the bus, and still trembling slightly.

'She's not dead,' Carr said, and, after a pause, 'Did you see it happen?'

The girl moved her head slightly in assent. Shock had

drawn the skin tight and her face appeared austere. 'Stepped right off the pavement,' she said. 'She was right in front.'

An ambulance drove up with bell ringing, and more spectators, curious rather than morbid, came in its wake.

'He couldn't have done anything,' the girl said. 'It wasn't the driver's fault. She stepped straight off the pavement.'

Carr did not see Robinson until he was a yard from them. His face was excited.

'Hullo, do you two know each other?' he said. 'Hullo, Alice,' to the girl.

Both Carr and the girl looked blank. 'Do you know each other?' Robinson repeated.

'No,' Carr said. 'We were just on the bus.'

Robinson looked pleased. 'What a coincidence!' he said, speaking more to Carr than to the girl. 'I was just going to meet Alice by the Library. Then I heard the ambulance. This is Alice. Alice, this is Derek Carr.'

'How do you do,' Carr said. 'A rather inauspicious meeting, I'm afraid.'

The girl, who still appeared shaken, smiled faintly.

'Look,' Robinson said to Carr, 'come for a coffee with us.'

Robinson walked between the elder man and the girl to the café, talking too much. His manner was nervous, volatile.

'What a coincidence!' he said again in the café. 'You meeting like that, how strange!'

To Carr, as if the two men were intimates, he said, 'I wanted you to meet Alice. She and I . . .'

At the moment he was in the centre, the force that held the design together.

'Alice, Derek's a reporter on the *Post*. Alice is a secretary with Enfield's, the accountants. Sitting next to each other you actually were! It's a small world, isn't it? Out of all the people! What did happen? I heard the ambulance.'

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'A woman stepped off the pavement in front of the bus,' Carr said, aware, without reflecting upon it, that all the time Robinson was concerned chiefly with him, leaving the girl to her own devices.

'Was she killed?' Robinson said. 'Did it go over her?'

'No. I should think she's badly injured though.'

'It wasn't the driver's fault,' the girl said. 'He hadn't a chance.'

Robinson turned to her with a grin. 'Ah, good old Alice. It's never anyone's fault, is it?' Then to Carr, waggishly teasing: 'You know, it's never anyone's fault with Alice. She can find excuses for anyone, almost anyone.'

The girl, Carr realized, had heard this before; it was one of their intimacies that was laid out from time to time for an outsider's inspection.

'It is a very Christian attitude,' Carr said. Then to Robinson: 'You must find it very fortunate on occasions.'

Robinson laughed too loudly. 'Oh, I'm the exception that proves the rule,' he said. 'Aren't I, dear? You don't make excuses for me.'

'You can make all your own,' the girl said. 'You don't need any help from me.' Her mind was away; she was making her responses from memory.

When the waitress brought their coffee the conversation died. A play with cups to bridge the gap.

'I suppose you haven't taken my advice yet?' Carr said to Robinson.

'No, no, I haven't,' he replied. 'I'm still thinking about it.' He looked warningly towards the girl.

An imp of perversity took hold of Carr. 'What do you think of our murder, Alice?' he said. 'Behind the bright façade . . .'

'Oh, she thinks women like that deserve to be murdered,' Robinson interrupted far too quickly.

'No excuses for them?' Carr asked the girl gently, merely to cover the boy's rudeness.

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'I never said that,' the girl replied. 'I think, I think they must always be taking a risk.'

'But, of course,' Carr said. 'Like children walking along a high wall. There's no pleasure in the actual act of putting one leg in front of the other; it is the risk that is the attraction, the compulsion, if you like. That applies to all those who walk outside the bounds of conventional respectability; it isn't that what they actually do is much fun—except to the very young, of course—the risk is all, the possibility of destruction, feared and desired.'

'Believe me,' Carr went on seriously, to Robinson primarily, 'the pleasures of the under-world are grossly overrated. At first, they may seem to possess a certain glamour, but with familiarity that fades; they become as sterile, sour, as the most vacuous pastimes of respectability . . .'

'But you don't really believe that,' the girl interrupted unexpectedly.

Carr ignored her. He was talking now with a purpose that seemed urgent, but whose nature he could not quite perceive. 'Then all that is left is the risk. Do you know the game of Russian roulette? One chamber of a revolver is loaded; the rest left empty. Then you swivel the cylinder around, hold the revolver to your head and press the trigger.'

Carr slapped his hand dramatically on the table, setting the coffee cups dancing. 'All right. A five to one chance you survive. But—here's the rub—how, after playing once, can you stop? After the risk of it, all other games seem intolerably tedious, so that you load the revolver again . . . and again . . . even until it bores you, and until your self-destruction becomes a mathematical certainty.'

'But it's fun while it lasts,' Robinson interjected facetiously.

Even while he was speaking, Carr realized he was displaying an intensity unjustified by what had gone before, incongruous among the coffee cups, but he had to continue it. 'So, the risk being all, one is compelled to go on

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and on, seeking new risks, until one accomplishes—in one or other of the many forms it can assume—one's own destruction.'

He had not quite finished, but, pausing for the difficult words, he was conscious of the curiosity of the girl's gaze, and was distracted.

'It's a compulsion, of course,' he began slowly. 'Perhaps one has no choice, even from the start, but . . .'

Again Robinson jumped in: 'By that reckoning there's a lot of people going to be murdered.'

All right; I will give up, Carr thought. He smiled, to mock his own words. 'Yes, I'm afraid there are,' he said.

Carr delayed his visit to the Gresham that evening. In the afternoon he had watched a Rugby match. The ball was greasy, but there were a number of good handling movements and seven tries were scored. One strong-running three-quarter gave Carr especial pleasure with his direct breaks through the middle. Despite a shower just after the start, the sun shone thinly throughout and the fresh breeze was invigorating.

After the match Carr went into the pavilion bar, where he ate some sandwiches. With an acquaintance he proceeded to an hotel where they played two frames of snooker. He left his companion at the hotel and, although it had started to rain again, began to pub-crawl, having one glass of beer only in each bar, choosing the uglier, more masculine houses, deliberately submerging himself in the Saturday-night talk of football, dogs, the crude obscenities, the irrational, bellicose arguments of working men.

To Carr this was a habitual anodyne, deadening the vibrant nerves, dulling the sharp probes of thought. So that even when he entered the Gresham, at its most garish and febrile, he experienced no reaction, either of irritation or stimulation.

He looked casually for Robinson, almost without thinking of him. There were two detectives to whom he nodded standing by the bar. When he saw Robinson, he did not approach him immediately. In his mind he was phrasing a reply to Yvonne— or rather two separate replies, neither of which would ever be written.

And so, my dear, forgive me all my selfishness, my insensitivity, my self-indulgence, all the failings of one who so badly let you down but who still loves you . . .

Or:

How typical of you is that attitude of resigned forbearance—and how intolerably smug and hypocritical! Even now, it seems, you must refuse to accept any jot of the blame, the guilt . . .

They were as stilted, unreal as literary exercises, were themselves, perhaps, exercises in emotion.

Robinson, at the bar, was listening to a much older man; with immaculate manicure, pastel-shaded clothing, and mobile mouth, he was familiar to Carr as representative of a type of equivocal character who frequented the Gresham at week-ends. Robinson's face was flushed and his eyes were moist.

Carr found he had nothing to say to him. He bought two drinks and let Robinson chatter. He listened to him with scarcely more attention than he had accorded the football arguments at the other bars. The younger man's flattering anxiety to please neither amused nor annoyed him. In an attempt to induce some emotion, to justify his presence there, he played with the thought: suppose this boy has killed a woman; that should make him worth one's time. But he could not believe it, or, rather, he could feel neither belief nor disbelief; the hypothesis itself was stillborn. Carr let his eyes slide to the table where he had seen the woman. A man was sitting there alone. He wore a dark suit and a neat white collar, like a clerk, but the lean face above was like a gypsy's. Beneath the yellowed,

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sullen skin that gave a superficial impression of impassivity, one felt, Carr thought, that the nerves and muscles were quivering in latent life. He held the man's eyes for a moment.

'What do you think of Alice?' he heard Robinson say.

'She seems a very pleasant girl.'

'Yes, yes, but after knowing Jean, you know, she seems . . . I mean, I know she's a nice girl and quite attractive too, but I think she's too quiet for me.'

'She did give me an impression that underneath she has quite some strong characteristics,' Carr said.

'Yes, I know. We're more or less engaged, you know. Do you think we're suited? Sometimes I feel very fond of her, but at others she just irritates me.'

'I can't say whether you are suited. You are probably as well suited as most couples are.'

He was locked in himself. He looked at Robinson with a kind of abstract speculation. This evening nothing which that boy may do can touch me, he thought. And then Robinson used a phrase, a cheaply dramatic phrase—'A woman, after all, is only any good in a kitchen or a bed'—that he had himself used somewhere, many years ago, on one of those occasions which, for no apparent reason, remains for ever just below the surface of memory, and it was as if this half-drunken boy were a part of himself, and that through him he could enter again forgotten corners of his past being.

'When I advised you to tell the police that you had been in her room, I never supposed you would,' Carr said. 'No-one ever really acts on advice unless it coincides with his own urges. People can only be influenced in more subtle ways.'

'Such as?'

'Through their weaknesses you can govern their actions to some extent.'

But only then, Carr thought, if they are weaknesses you share or have known. He looked at his watch.

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'Would you care to come up to the club, to Wally's?'

He was almost frightened by the readiness of Robinson's acceptance. I know you now, Carr thought. I've got you. But there was no sense of victory.

The man with the gypsy face was still sitting at the woman's table.

One telephoned and then Wally sent down the barman to open the door. Though the main illumination came from shaded electric lamps, candles in beer bottles smoked on the bar. Dance music sounded softly from a radiogram. The club did little business until the pubs had shut, but when Carr and Robinson entered there were a few people sitting on high stools at the bar, and on the settees, women in pairs, no longer very young, who regarded them with a mildly mercenary surmise.

• 'You haven't been up here before?' Carr asked. 'It's not particularly amusing, but it's useful for drinking out of hours. Then there's that risk again,' he added humorously. 'You might always be raided, I mean.'

A tall blonde sitting at the bar was drunk in an exhibitive, loquacious fashion. 'I love men,' she was saying quietly. 'I love to do things to them. They stupefy me, stupefy me.'

'That's Myrtle,' Carr said. 'One of the X certificate attractions.'

Robinson could not keep his eyes from her.

'You don't want to encourage her. She'll eat you,' Carr said. This was vicarious pleasure.

When Robinson went to the bar to buy drinks, he stood next to the blonde girl and she spoke to him.

The club began to fill rapidly. In addition to its regular clientele—the misfits, the bookmakers' entourage, the alcoholics and the lascivious—a number of young middle-class men and girls on a Saturday-night spree had come in and were noisy in corners. A man from one of these groups invited Robinson to join them but he declined.

Carr's two acquaintances from the Gresham, still in

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coloured shirts, had entered, and the man, with the gypsy face.

When Carr next went to the bar to order drinks he asked the proprietor: 'Who's that yellow-faced fellow on his own there?'

'I think he's a scouse, wack,' Wally replied, in a parody of a Liverpool accent.

'What's his name?'

'How should I know?' Wally said in his normal officers'-mess voice. 'You bloody soaks never put your right names in the book. Does it matter?'

'It doesn't matter that much.'

'He's not a cop, is he?'

'I shouldn't think so,' Carr replied.

He was beginning to tire of the role he was playing. The room had become smoky and moist.

'I think we'll go after this one.'

When the blonde girl went out to the lavatory she looked with a smile at Robinson.

'I'm getting a bit tired,' Carr said. 'Pleasure-seeking is so arduous.'

'I see what you mean,' Robinson said politely. His eyes were still shining, but he followed Carr dutifully when the reporter rose.

Their direct way back to the town's centre was along a road near to that in which the dead woman had lived. Without saying anything, Carr guided Robinson so that they passed into St. James Street. The rain was dripping from the trees. Some of the downstairs rooms in the boarding houses were lit but uncurtained, and threw their parallelograms of light on to the roadway. In one a man was eating, reading a paper-backed book propped up on the table in front of him. A woman was knitting and two others were sitting talking in the next lit room; in a third sat a man and a woman, both elderly, both without movement, their hands crossed in their laps. It was as if each window were a gateway to another world.

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'What was her flat like?' Carr said.

They had almost reached the house.

'It was all right. She had gas fires and there were pictures on the wall. It was never very tidy,' Robinson said dully.

'Is that all you can say about it?'

'Well, there were a lot of cushions. She had three rooms.'

Carr turned to look at the house as they passed. There was a light on in the top flat but the curtains were drawn.

'Not exactly a temple of love then?'

'No, it was just ordinary.'

A man turned out of one of the side-streets on the other side of the road walking in the direction from which Carr and Robinson had come. He moved quickly, on the balls of his feet, lithely, like a gypsy. Carr looked back, but the street was dark between the parallelograms of light and he could see no-one.

THE dream from which Robinson awoke was remarkably relevant and consistent, its symbols unambiguous. He, the dreamer, with unidentified others, imprisoned on the globe's surface in a shallow hole beneath rough cromlechs of white stone; a single aeroplane flying overhead—this at the end of the world, when no other aeroplanes would fly, no life move, for ever and ever. Within the aeroplane was his mother. It was an old-fashioned biplane, flying low and with great difficulty. From beneath the stones he could hear the fuselage straining, the sick, irregular beat of the engines. The aeroplane circled slowly round and round. Now, if it were to crash into the confining stones, the dreamer, though endangered, would be freed, the cromlechs flattened, the outlet opened. He was lying prone on the dry, baked earth and saw through the stones the aeroplane slowly breaking up, the struts fractured, flying wires, something dark falling . . .

The aeroplane was diving down as Robinson awoke. Between the curtains sunlight seeped into the room. A feeling of intense apprehension, more acute than anything he had experienced since awakening from childhood nightmares, possessed him. His mouth was dry and had a metallic taste. He felt a great reluctance to move, to leave the warm nest of the sheets to enter a cold and hostile world.

He tried to sleep again; the terrors of the dream were less frightening than the realities of experience. But sleep would not come. In the road outside a dog was barking sharply; church bells were ringing in the distance; a smell of frying bacon was in the room. Sleep would not come as he lay curled, his mind open to innumerable fleeting images, emotions, all of which contained the common

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element of fear. He thought once, with affectionate tenderness, of Alice.

Another dog started to bark. Robinson got up, put on a dressing-gown and went downstairs.

His sister was already at breakfast. 'You look like death warmed up,' she said. 'You must have had a good night.'

He picked up a newspaper and put it on the table in front of him as he ate, reading the previous day's football results, but conscious all the time of this fear, like a smell, pervading him.

His mother brought in the bacon. 'Did you have a nice time, dear?' She received his grunted acknowledgement with distressed eyes. Later she said brightly, 'What are you all doing today?'

- It was an effort to speak, somehow it brought the world closer. 'I shan't be here for lunch,' he said. 'I'm going out for the day with Alice. We arranged to if it was fine.'

It was fine. The wind had dropped and overhead the sky was a hard blue, in the distance shading into white cloud. The sun shone steadily but without strength, like an old man obstinately clinging on to life. There was the Sunday-morning quiet, which was the absence of traffic noises, so that the birds' songs were as clear as on a spring day, and the steps, the noises of the morning walkers sounded clearly from far away.

When Robinson went out the Catholics, their missals in their hands, were returning from Mass. He felt again this emotion of grateful tenderness for his girl, which brought with it a sentimental, almost voluptuous, sense of shame for his customary disregard of her. The aeroplanes from the nearby flying-field were already up, and they looped, climbed, dived overhead, their engines sounding clear and pure on this bright morning.

He was glad that he was early and had to wait for her, but his sense of tenderness diminished as he saw the girl come down the street. He knew the smile that was on her

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face even before she was near enough for him to distinguish her features, and with recognition came disappointment. He resisted it, and walked briskly towards her, his smile, his cheerful greeting, as much to warn himself as to please the girl.

He knew that she would say soon: where are we going? His answer had been prepared: as he had walked towards their rendezvous he had remembered a Sunday in another year when they had sailed down the river on a pleasure boat to a green island at the mouth of the estuary.

‘Where are we going?’

Her reaction when he told her brought again this feeling of disappointment—actuality never lived up to the anticipation! Her objections made him insistent.

‘Of course, the boats go all the year round. You won’t be too cold.’ He nearly added: well, why didn’t you bring a coat? ‘It’s a warm day. We’ll buy some sandwiches.’

They caught a train to the port from which the boats sailed. They had a compartment to themselves, and he was affectionate, holding her arm, putting his face against her cheek, stroking her hair. She had, it seemed, forgotten her objections and was happy.

The boat still sailed, but at this time of the year only once each day, and at the landing-stage they found they had two hours to wait. There was nothing to do. The city was empty, moribund. The gulls squawked around the masts of the ferries as they crossed the turbid river. At two cafés by the docks the girl tried unsuccessfully to buy sandwiches. Time crept on like a limping beast. Already the light was going out of the day.

Robinson worked hard to put it back. They ate, finally, in a squalid café, sandwiched between the giant, skeletal frameworks of blitzed warehouses. Poached eggs and greasy chips, with bread and margarine, and tea in thick, cracked cups. Three Lascar seamen were eating with some sluttish white girls.

Robinson made an adventure out of it. ‘The tea’s

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probably drugged. I'll be thrown in the river, and you'll wake up in a ship bound for Buenos Aires.'

When the gates were raised they were the first passengers on the pleasure boat. The gulls swooped over the ship, diving to drag fragments of refuse from the grease of the river. On deck they could feel the beginnings of a cold wind from which they had been sheltered on the quay.

A party of youths and girls in shorts, with bicycles, came aboard. There were some family parties; the children soon made friends and pursued each other noisily about the decks. A group of men in cheap, dark suits, who had been drinking, came up the gangway and went straight to the bar.

Robinson put his arm around the girl as they leant, two lovers, on the rail. The engines pulsed beneath their feet; the movement, with its illusion of warmth, sustained them at first; later it became aggravating, like the ticking of a clock, emphasizing time's passing.

There were no more passengers coming aboard, but members of the crew on the quayside stood talking idly with the dockers, as if they had disowned the vessel, had surrendered it to the afternoon's chill torpor.

Robinson resisted, chattering with a mechanical vivacity, as the afternoon crumbled around him. Along the rail were a middle-aged couple, dressed in light, dirty mackintoshes, with woollen scarves wrapped around their necks.

'Look,' Robinson said. 'There is a romance. Mr. Snodgrass of Form 5b, and Miss Popplewhite, the music mistress, stealing away for an afternoon of love.' His humour was not violently out of character, for it was, fundamentally, a pitiless joke.

'They look like brother and sister to me,' the girl said.

'Have you no romance in your soul? Can't you see the passion burring beneath those macs?'

The ship eventually—reluctantly, it seemed—manœuvred away from the landing-stage. In the middle of the river the wind was colder, and the sun, low in the west, towards which they were sailing, glowed without warmth,

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like copper. The massive liners in the dockyards were lifeless, deserted, and lower down the river, on the other bank, the ship-building yards, the scaffolding gaunt against the skyline, were idle.

Beneath them as they leaned on the rail the river was churned into a thin, brown gruel by the ship's prow.

'Do you remember when we came down here last time how we met that couple from Devon?'

'Yes, they were nice. I wonder if they ever did find that house,' the girl said.

'Oh, yes, where their cousin lived. I wonder.'

'Do you remember their dog, wasn't it sweet? What did they call it? Barker? Biter?'

'Bouncer. No, it began with S. Screamer, Scratcher.'

'Yes, that's it, Scratcher.'

'Scratcher.'

'Do you remember . . .'

He was caught in memory's sweet, sad flow.

'Alice, I am very fond of you, you know. If I—it's only when I'm upset I treat you badly. I . . .'

'Excuse me. I wonder if you have such a thing as a match.' It was the man with the scarf and mackintosh.

The first two that he struck blew out. 'It's decidedly fresh today, isn't it?' the stranger said. When he had lit his pipe he seemed inclined to linger. 'Are you two by any chance alighting at the island, I wonder?'

'We haven't made up our minds,' Robinson said discouragingly.

When the man had gone it seemed as if his intrusion had brought them closer together. Robinson put his face against the girl's and held her close to him.

'Your face is cold, Alice. Do you want to go inside?'

'No, no. I'm all right. I'm fine.'

'Alice, you're very good to put up with me like you do.'

'Don't talk nonsense, dear.'

He looked over her shoulder. 'Mr. Snodgrass doesn't seem to be making much progress,' he said, laughing;

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then: 'I want to make up to you for . . . it's not that I want always to be such a—I can't help it sometimes.'

The girl put her hand lightly against his mouth. 'Don't talk nonsense.'

His self-abasement induced an exquisite melancholy to which he surrendered languorously. The boat's movement was reassuring; they forgot the tedium of the hours behind them.

'Why don't we do this more often?'

'Yes, why don't we?'

'My dear.'

'My dear.'

The island to the east was dark and cragged, but the pleasure boat, its siren stirring to frantic agitation the sea-gulls on the cliffs, turned around it and into the quiet harbour, behind which the lush, green fields sloped sharply skywards.

Only about a score of the passengers disembarked; the others continued in the warmth of the bar to the mainland port.

'Which way did we go last time?' Robinson said.

'I know.'

She took his hand and set off briskly up the cobbled hill, past the genteel cafés and the closed bars. Her mood had changed to one of brisk cheerfulness. Robinson allowed her to take the initiative.

'We go this way and we pass a church, then there's a farmyard and we're out on the road over the sea.'

He was amazed that she could remember it so clearly. His recollection of the day they had spent on the island previously consisted only of a feeling of mood, atmosphere, without precise images. Now as he looked about him, it was like coming upon a place of which he had dreamed.

'Do you see that wall? Well, just by where it turns—don't you remember?—we sat and smoked. Surely you remember.'

'Oh, yes, of course.'

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'And the sheep ran away from us.'

'Yes, that's right.'

'Oh, look—there's the ship. Doesn't it look small from here?'

'Like a toy. Are you glad we came, Alice?'

'Of course. It's lovely.'

'Not too cold?'

'Not cold at all. It's lovely. We must do it more often.'

'Yes, we must, we really must.'

The girl's hair was swept straight back from her head by the wind. Because of the cold her forehead and chin were white, but her cheeks were glowing. For Robinson it all had a sweet, mortal poignancy, like a schoolboy's first love.

'Dear Alice,' he said. His eyes were stinging from the wind.

'Come on. I want to get to the top.'

Sitting on a low stone wall, they ate some chocolate which was all the girl had been able to buy in the port.

'I'm not really hungry,' she said.

'Nor am I,' Robinson said. 'You have that last piece.'

'No, you have it.'

'No, you.'

Night was falling, the twilight lying heavy between the wind-bowed trees, before they turned back, and it had grown still colder. The lights in the town beneath invited tantalizingly. Once they walked down a lane which ended in a farmyard, and they had to retrace their steps. They spoke infrequently. He held her arm and she put her hand in his pocket. The buoys in the estuary twinkled like fireworks.

'When does the boat come back?'

'After seven. We'll have something to eat.'

In the café it was warm and cheerful, with a large fire burning in a brick grate; to feel the heat creeping into one's bones was a positive physical pleasure. The tables were of polished wood, with neat lace doilies on them.

'Would you like shrimps or eggs . . . ?'

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'We had eggs before.'

'... or buttered scones, or ... ?'

'I'll have whatever you have.'

'Tea or coffee?'

'Whatever you have.'

If this moment, this day, could only endure, and the fears belonged solely to the insubstantial world of dreams.

'Alice, whatever happens. No, I mean, I think I shall always remember this day. It's been a wonderful day. I'm so fond of you.'

'Yes, it's been a wonderful day,' she said; and, gently mocking him, 'Thank you, sir. It's nice of you to be fond of me. I am very fond of you too.'

A woman, the proprietress of the café, came to put logs on the fire. The sparks leapt up the chimney.

'Quite chilly now, isn't it?'

'But it's been nice and bright,' the girl replied.

'A nice change after all that rain. Was your tea all right?'

'Lovely, thank you. It's so nice to ...'

With a few phrases they had created a cosy, feminine domesticity from which Robinson was momentarily excluded, alone, so that thought had no competitor. The woman went away, smiling cheerfully, and for a breath's time the boy and girl had nothing to say to each other.

Thoughts can be as potent as words, as dangerously communicative.

'Who was that man, dear, the dark man, the reporter?' the girl said.

Almost he hated her. In that bright, warm teashop, he almost hated her for bringing back the world, and bringing back the dreams, the fractured struts, the flying wires.

He shrugged, raising his eyebrows. 'Oh, just a man I met. He's a reporter.'

'Yes, I know. When did you meet him?'

'I've known him some time off and on.' His voice was deliberately casual and remote.

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'He seems somehow, I don't know . . . Is he married?'

'I shouldn't think so; I don't know.'

'It seems like as if he was, as if he was hungry.'

'Hungry!'

'As if he was, oh, I don't know . . . ' She left it at that.

When they had finished eating they sat a while, turned towards the fire so that the heat was tangible on their eyes, watching the patterns of the burning logs and the white ash falling.

'Wouldn't you like a drink before we sail?' the girl said.

'Oh, I don't mind.'

'Yes, do have one.'

The pub was pleasant, more like a club whose members all know one another, but yet do not make the stranger unwelcome.

'It's a nice little pub, isn't it?'

They had only one drink each, however, and then went out on to the quay.

There was some shelter from the wind and they leant against a low wall, looking out over the estuary towards the open sea. Beneath them the waves lapped rhythmically against the stone. At first they stood side by side, with his arm around her; soon he turned her towards him and they held each other, kissing.

The boat came into view suddenly around the back of the island. With all its lights and the reflections glittering in the water, it was like a giant fairground caravan.

'It's been a wonderful day, Alice,' he said.

'It's not over yet, dearest. The boat's fin going back,' she said brightly.

She wiped his lips with her handkerchief, straightened her hair and put on her lipstick.

They stayed on deck until the boat reached the centre of the estuary, watching the lights of the breakwater disappearing one by one behind the rocks, and the island's black bulk becoming less and less solid, and then the wind

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drove them into the warmth of the bar. There all was garish and harsh, the portholes and mirrors steamed over, and the men who had spent the entire voyage in the same seats were singing spasmodically. It was the world of the Gresham again, but to Robinson this time empty of its exhilaration, bringing back only the apprehension, the nervous strain.

The girl seemed sensitive to his change of mood, and it was she who found a locker in a recess, where they sat uncomfortably, glasses in hand, but in a closer intimacy for the strident laughter, the voices in the bar a few yards away.

'It's nice like this,' the girl said.

He put his hand on her arm. 'Dear Alice.'

She said, almost as if to herself: 'It would be nicer if you were really happy.'

He said nothing.

'But it's nice all the same,' she said. 'It's still nice being with you. Whatever you feel, I'm always happy when I'm with you.'

He still said nothing. A great wave of self-pity had swept over him suddenly, obliterating the happy hours; when she had reminded him of his unhappiness it had been as if she had been recalling to a man with a mortal disease the fact that his days were numbered.

She sipped from her glass and then turned to him, smiling. 'Even when you're a bad-tempered, moody . . .'

'If you had my reasons for being moody, you'd . . .' It was out before he knew he had spoken. '. . . you wouldn't always be so happy.'

The girl turned questioning, but not too serious, eyes upon him. He emptied his glass quickly and rose and went to the bar. The men in dark suits were singing a sentimental Irish song.

To see again the ripples of the trout stream, the women in the meadows making hay . . .

Their euphoric well-being emphasized his own baffled

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sense of dereliction, increasing it by contrast, as one feels one's loneliness most acutely in a crowd. All men were enemies, and when he returned to the girl his face expressed his hostility like a snarl.

'What is it, Martin?'

'Nothing, there's nothing.'

. . . and if there's going to be a life hereafter, and somehow I am sure there's going to be . . .

'What a bloody noise they make!'

He tried deliberately to fan the flames of his anger, and to rationalize it, because beneath the heat was a gelid, incomprehensible dismay; and, deeper still, was the suspicion that even from the moment he had woken from his dream he had been shaping the day for this moment.

'Will you come on deck, Alice?'

They shivered as they emerged into the raw night air. They stood behind a cabin, sheltered from the direct impact of the wind.

'Alice, you don't know what this has meant to me today,' Robinson said. He did not look at her at all; his self-pity isolated him. 'You don't know what I've had to put up with lately. It's been my fault—I know it's been my fault. Oh, Alice, I do love you.'

It was the first time he had said it to her for a long while, but the words were unconvincing, an expression only of a strong emotion, any emotion. As well he might have said: I hate you.

'Alice, I'm sorry for what I've done.' Now it was coming out, welling out, the relief of sharing one's misery, giving pain, like a burden, to another to carry.

'That woman who was killed, I knew her. I—I used to sleep with her. For months. We were lovers. You see, you wouldn't . . .'

He was shivering more violently now and looking up into her face, compelling response.

'It was different from with you, different. I had to. You can't imagine what it was like.'

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It was too dark for him to see her expression. She was looking straight ahead, holding her head stiffly.

'And now she's been killed. The police have been on at me, always on at me, it'll all come out.'

Already his burden was becoming lighter. He took hold of her arm, but she did not relax. He had not yet given her enough to bear.

'Even when I was seeing you I used to go with her. You see, I was the last one with her. I was up in her room the night she was killed. What shall I do, Alice? I don't know . . .'

'How can you tell me all this?' the girl said, her voice neutral. 'Why now? Why do you have to tell me?'

That was inadequate. Cunning intruded itself, almost unconsciously: 'Alice, I do need you. I don't know what I shall do. I've never needed you like I need you now.'

There was a perverse pleasure in the shame of abasement, which he savoured for itself, as well as for the surrender it would—he was confident—induce in the girl. He still had hold of her arm, but she moved free now.

'I think it's beastly,' she said. Still she did not turn towards him.

'You won't let me down now, Alice, will you? I've told you because it's you, you, because I trust you.'

'I don't know how you could.'

'The police will keep on at me, you know. They suspect me, even because I lied to them, about being with her that night.'

'I'll have to think,' the girl said, as if to herself. For the first time there was pain in her voice and he felt almost satisfied. It had been done, the day justified.

'You won't let me down, Alice, you can't.'

'I don't know what I shall do.'

There were dark, shifting caverns along the quayside as each wire-strung lamp jerked in the wind. As they passed

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beneath the overhead railway, an empty tram, its lights blazing, swayed across the deserted square in front of them, sucking the dust and torn paper in its wake. Instinctively Robinson put out a hand to halt the girl, and when she shook him off he looked at her in surprise, feeling she had dealt him a gratuitous affront. He saw her mouth moving, but his ears were filled with the tramcar's clatter.

'What did you say?'

'Nothing.'

'No, what did you say?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'Well, you don't have to jump away from me.'

'I said, I can see for myself.'

She was walking slackly, a little in front of him, allowing the wind to carry her words to him. He was on the point of letting her get away with it when she said something else that he could not catch, and, angered by this, he grabbed her arm again.

She defeated his intention by not resisting, and, allowing him to turn her to him, she merely looked up at the boy in an attitude of interrogation. He wanted to hurt her, but no words came, and, for a moment, they stood still in the windy square, with their faces inches apart.

It was she who turned. 'I want to get home,' she said.

Now he was the suppliant. 'There's no need to be like this, Alice,' he said pleadingly, to her back, as they began to walk again.

'I'm not like anything; I'm just tired. I want to get home.'

'Anyone would think I'm a criminal, or something.'

She did not speak.

'You've had a good day, haven't you? It was a good day until I told you, but you've forgotten all that. Let's do it again, we said.'

She said, firmly: 'It was a good day, but you've destroyed it. Now it has never been good.'

It was not her words, but a new maturity she seemed to

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have put on, like a dress, that overawed him. He was suddenly much younger than she. This, he felt; felt, also, though without understanding, that while it was her unhappiness which had brought this maturity, it was also because she was newly older than he, that she could suffer unhappiness the more completely. He was like a child, with a child's petty worries, uncomprehending of adult sorrows, outside.

The steamy compartment in the train was crowded and they could not talk. He watched the girl, slumped in her seat, her eyes closed in a white face. After a while it became a stranger's face and he too closed his eyes.

IN the reporters' room at the end of the day there was an atmosphere of boredom, of frustration. Desultory conversations flickered and died. When Sisley came in, Horsley told him the dirty story he had just told the others.

'You've no job tonight, Derek, have you?' Sisley said, after laughing. 'Would you care to come round for a drink? Norma would be glad to see you.'

'Oh, thanks, I might. What time would you like to see me?'

'As you like. I won't have finished the bottle.'

'Well, I might,' Carr said. 'Look, it depends. I have to phone a girl. I might be taking her out.'

To telephone he went into another room, wondering why he had lied.

It was past five o'clock and the boy might have left, but Carr recognized his voice as soon as he spoke.

'Hullo, Martin. This is Derek. How are you getting on? I just thought as I hadn't seen you around for a few days I'd find out if you'd been incarcerated.' It was like telephoning a woman, Carr thought, when one is uncertain of one's reception.

'No developments, I suppose? Are you free this evening?'

'I shan't be able to make it after all,' he told Sisley. 'I shall be philandering.'

'You gay bachelors don't know how lucky you are.'

'Think of the tax we have to pay,' Carr said, 'and the gins and oranges we have to buy, while you married men have your pleasure and get paid for it by the Government.'

'You make a mockery of a beautiful thing,' Sisley said. 'Good hunting.'

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This was the phrase that Carr recalled as he said to Robinson: 'I don't feel much like drinking tonight. Would you care to come back to my place?'

His landlady was in the lounge, sitting back in an arm-chair, as so frequently she was to be found, without book, or paper, or knitting, immobile and apparently contentedly self-contained. So she had been in that chair when he had made his first sexual approach to her, and she had received him with the same detached impassivity.

'Mrs. Hammond, this is a friend of mine, Martin Robinson.'

It amused him wryly that each of them should be quite indifferent to the other. The former mistress and the future, the future . . .

'Mrs. Hammond is a quietist, Martin. She, she accepts all the slings and arrows of outrageous and, indeed, of any sort of fortune with complete resignation. You could learn a lot from her.'

Neither the boy nor the woman spoke. Carr felt he wanted to laugh. 'I think I've got some beer in my room,' he said. 'Excuse me a minute.'

He fetched two pint bottles of ale. There was an absence of conversation in the room when he returned.

'Only a couple of bottles left. I've had them for months. I don't as a rule do much solitary drinking, it's too . . . it induces morbidity.'

He went to the sideboard. 'You'll join us in one, Mrs. Hammond?'

As he was bending to take the glasses from the cupboard—laughter, like a spring, still bubbling in his throat—Carr said, 'You and Mrs. Hammond have another mutual acquaintance, Martin. Mrs. Hammond knew the nylon murderess. Oh, damn!'—straightening—'I've no opener.'

'I'll get one,' the woman said. She had a manner of leaving a room so that one almost did not notice she had gone.

'Derek . . .'

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'It's all right. I'll be discretion itself. You're growing too sensitive. Such a bourgeois complaint, unfashionable now! Toughness is the thing, my boy, what all the 'best-adjusted post-war men wear.'

She re-entered a room in the same imperceptible manner, like a house dog.

'Did you know her?' the woman said to Robinson. 'I only knew her going shopping, seeing her about.'

'I'd met her,' Robinson replied uncomfortably.

'Martin and she were drinking—that is the word, isn't it?—acquaintances,' Carr said.

'Was she what they say she was?' the woman asked. 'Was she kept by a man?'

'Ha!' Carr laughed dramatically. 'That's what they all ask, all the women. The poor bitch was strangled, but that doesn't interest them. There's only one thing that counts. Mark it, Martin, mark it. Musk. When the time comes for you to shuffle off, they won't ask what sonnets you wrote, how big an atom bomb you built, whether your son has grown up a good citizen of the Welfare State, how, how—no, but: how long was it? and, how did he? and, and . . . Well, that's how they are.'

'I only asked whether she was . . . '

'Yes, that's right, ducky,' Carr interrupted. 'Here, here's your glass.'

He raised his theatrically. 'To the late Jean McCarless—may her soul rest in peace.' He turned to Robinson: 'Come on, Martin, drink up.'

When the woman had left the room Carr poked the fire into a blaze and pulled his chair close to it. Robinson sat at the table behind him, swilling the dregs of beer around his glass.

'Martin,' Carr said, without turning, his voice dropped to a lower tone, 'I—er—it seems to me that you're upset a little tonight. Is this business getting on top of you?' He

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paused briefly, and then added: 'Of course, don't tell me if you don't want to; I don't want to pry.'

'Not on top of me, really; it's just that, oh, I don't know, just that you don't know what's going to happen.'

'I see,' Carr said, remaining crouched over the hearth. He phrased mentally some alternative openings, selecting finally: 'Tell me, have you any religious beliefs?'

'Not especially. I mean, well, just like everyone else, I suppose.'

'But it doesn't worry you?'

'Well, I suppose I'm an, an agnostic.'

That position established, the attack could be developed on another flank. 'Tell me, has it ever occurred to you why whoever killed her killed her?'

'No, I don't know. I suppose . . . No, I don't know.'

Carr picked up the poker and began to play with it, pushing a piece of coal along a crack in the tiles of the hearth.

'It might have been jealousy, you know,' he said.

'Yes, I suppose it might have been.'

'I mean that whoever it was might have known about you, been jealous of you.'

'I hadn't thought about it.'

Carr laid down the poker and stood up. He leant back against the mantelpiece, looking down at Robinson.

'Jealousy,' he began, more in the manner of an extension lecturer than one outlining the facts of life, 'jealousy—I speak only from observation, and, perhaps, memory—is for simple or for passionate natures, however it may seem to the complicated or the, the burnt out, is an emotion as strong as any you like, as strong as hunger or lust or, if you prefer, as that of self-preservation. It is also a very curious and involved affair, triangular. There is he—or she, of course—who is jealous, she for whom he is jealous, and the third of whom he is jealous. And between these three there exists a most curious relationship—much less simple than you might think. It is, however unconsciously

on the part of one or two of them, as if they have created a Frankenstein, a monster bigger than themselves, and'—here Carr emphasized his words by a repetitive movement of his forefinger—'and one to whom all three must constantly minister.'

Robinson was still holding his glass between his hands, and was frowning as if in perplexity.

Carr realized that if the attack were to achieve its objects more direct methods would have to be adopted. It was a time for bayonets. 'What I am getting at is this: this jealousy comes to exist as an entity—a thing in itself, to which these three have given creation. Whatever it does, this monster, all three of them are equally involved. All three are equally responsible. The murderer, if you like, is also the murdered, and vice versa, and the third one, he, too, is murderer and murderee.'

Carr levered himself up from the mantelpiece to indicate that the address was nearly over. Questions and discussion would follow. 'You are upset because—although you are unaware of it—you feel this, feel how deeply you are involved, feel all that jealousy is: the excitement, the betrayal, the gratified vanity—and the guilt.'

'Yes, but you see, it's not that . . .'

'Yet you have told me that you have no religious beliefs,' Carr went on, as if he had not been interrupted, but in a lower key. 'So what does it all amount to, all this emotion? Just—emotion; feelings, without any moral or logical validity. Fear of the dark, walking under ladders, just superstition. That's it, isn't it, Martin?'

'I don't see what you're getting at,' Robinson said after an interval.

Carr smiled in self-depreciation. 'It seems to me that you feel—even perhaps unconsciously—that you are to a degree responsible for her being dead. And, and there's more to it than that: you feel guilty too about the whole affair, the forbidden pleasures of her body, and so on.'

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'I'm right, aren't I?' He put his hand on Robinson's shoulder and the boy looked up.

'Aren't I right?' he repeated firmly.

'I don't know. I don't know. It may . . . perhaps I do feel guilty about it.'

'Of course you do.' The smile that Carr had assumed was still fixed on his face like a scar. 'Anyone would; it's natural. But why, why? You can't tell me why.'

'What I am trying to do,' he went on, his duplicity and the corruption, bitter-sweet in his mouth, 'is to show you how unnecessary it is. Now if you were religious, if you accepted some code of morality, your guilt might have some justification, but as it is—superstition, just superstition. You've no need for any repentance.'

Carr laughed a little unnaturally—the class was about to be dismissed. 'I'm very eloquent about this, aren't I? I think there's a drop of beer left in this one. Give me your glass.'

He poured a little ale into each of their glasses.

'You feel ashamed, perhaps, as much, even, about bedding with her and being unfaithful to that nice girl of yours, as for your responsibility for her death.'

'But I couldn't . . . She went with other men.'

'That's right,' Carr said. 'Of course, she did. You hang on to that. Look, it's getting late.'

He emptied his glass, and Robinson did likewise automatically.

'Think about this. I'll give you a ring later in the week.'

He watched Robinson walk down the path into the steely moonlight; then he went back into the room and sat close to the fire, which was reduced to embers, looking into it and trying to warm himself.

For Robinson the world was tinged with unreality. The familiar lamp-posts, houses, trees, the occasional passers-by became separately strange objects that could not be

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accepted collectively, but demanded individual attention. He saw everything in sharp focus, as one does in the fever that precedes a severe cold. It was a sensation similar to that which mountain-lovers experience on top of a high peak, when, at one and the same time, the material world impinges forcibly on the consciousness and yet, paradoxically, there is a perception of an incorporeal remoteness.

It was still quite early. The night was mild; a suggestion of mist seeped in from the estuary to hang—it seemed—in balls around the lights, softening and diffusing their rays.

He walked without method. His mind was working irregularly; images flickered into his attention like faulty lantern-slide projections. He stood for a while under the verandahs in the main street and watched some adolescents hobbledelohoying in a shop doorway. A police sergeant and a constable were standing on the opposite side of the street but they took no notice of him.

At the corner under the jeweller's clock three men were talking. A phrase uttered by one of them rang out across the empty road like a tocsin. 'They actually use it for embalming purposes.' It sank in Robinson's mind, echoing in circles.

Later he was in the railway station. Mist and steam glowed under the vaulted roof. At the side of the bookstall a couple were kissing; the man had his back to the shutters, and the girl stood on her toes as she pressed against him. Some men were waiting for the last train.

The club to which he had been with Carr was near the station. Robinson knocked on the door without attempt at concealment, and then more loudly when no-one came.

'What the hell do you think you're doing?' The door had opened a foot; the proprietor's face was visible only as a white blur through the gap.

'Can I come up?' Robinson said.

'You're not a member. The club's closed.'

And the door shut.

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He pushed at the door but it remained fast, and he walked aimlessly across to the opposite pavement—*they actually use it for embalming purposes*. He lit a cigarette in a doorway.

The man crossing the road towards him was hatless but his coat collar covered his chin. He walked directly up to the boy. The blow caught Robinson at the side of the mouth, the man's fist carrying through to rasp over his cheek. He fell back into the doorway—*they actually use it for embalming purposes*—as the man ran lightly down the street and around the corner.

GENTLEMEN, gentlemen.' The chairman tried to restore the atmosphere of reasonable discussion. 'No-one questions Mr. Councillor Lamplew's motives. It's only a matter of trying to look at this like hard-headed businessmen.'

Temper had flared up in the committee room like a spirit fire, and, jaundiced in the ochreous artificial light, the members were shouting and gesticulating across the horse-shoe table. It was as if the individuals grouped in a photographic tableau had suddenly come to life.

Robinson put down his pencil and once more raised his hand to his mouth. It was not very painful, but the gum was cut, and all day he had been probing it with his tongue, as, analogously, he had been worrying the incident of the blow in his mind. He could think of nothing else. Who was it who had walked out of the fog to strike him? With what motive? And what would come next? To these questions his mind returned unending answers in infinite permutation. He lifted the loose piece of skin with his finger, then rubbed his hand on his note-pad to see if there were traces of blood. He tried to see his reflection in the glass covering the picture at the end of the room of the Mayor, 1922-4, to discover if his face were swollen. Who had it been? Why? What will happen next?

'Mr. Robinson,' the chairman repeated.

He had not noticed that the argument had been stilled; sand had been thrown on the flames.

'Mr. Robinson, the minutes, please.'

'The minutes, sir?'

'As Mr. Councillor Lamplew has reminded us'—the chairman here regarded that gentleman with a smile of bland hatred—'we passed a resolution on this subject last year. Would you please look it up?'

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Robinson hurriedly scurried among his papers. 'It was resolved that the chairman and vice-chairman be appointed a sub-committee to consider and report at the next meeting . . .'

'Well, that appears to settle it, gentlemen,' the chairman said. 'If the vice-chairman and myself have exceeded our authority, you will appreciate, I am sure, that it was only in the best interests of the Council. Unless Mr. Councillor Lamplew has any desire to proceed further . . .'

He paused momentarily and then went on quickly, 'I don't see that anything more can usefully be said. I would ask members of the committee not to allow their political prejudices to run away with them. We are all working to the best of our ability, irrespective of party label, for the maintenance and improvement of this beautiful town of ours. Is there any other business?'

Robinson gathered together his papers. The meeting was closed. The chairman put his arm around the shoulders of the councillor who had opposed him and made a joke.

'The gentlemen of the press await us, Robinson,' the chairman said. The other members of the committee had gone. 'Well, we scotched them this time, didn't we?' he went on confidentially. 'I've said it before; I'll say it again: the only efficient committee is a one-man committee, eh?'

Carr was among the reporters waiting for the chairman in the lobby.

'Well, there's nothing much for you today, gentlemen,' the chairman said. 'A very quiet meeting. The committee did decide . . .'

When the chairman and the other reporters had gone, Carr and Robinson began to speak simultaneously. The younger man gave way.

'Did Lamplew bring it up? He said he was going to. The Trades Council had a go at it last week. Municipal scandal, abuse of authority and so on.'

'Oh, that!' Robinson said. Carr's interest in the affairs

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of the committee seemed almost shocking. "They had a go at it, but the old man smoothed it over, sort of."

"Look," he went on excitedly, "you know when I left your place last night, someone hit me. I walked about a bit and I went up to the station, and I stood around, I'd just lit a cigarette and a man came up and hit me. In the face. I'd never seen him before."

"What?" Carr said, mid-way between mirth and incredulity. "Someone hit you?"

"Who could it have been? Not the police. It wasn't Hyams; I know Hyams. It's something to do with it, though, something to do with Jean. Who'd just come up and hit you and run away? A stranger."

"Where were you?" Carr asked.

His relative lack of interest that seemed to belittle the incident at the same time reassured and irritated Robinson. "I was in a doorway in Park-street, lighting a cigarette. He just came over the road and came up to me and hit me."

"An unofficial strike, obviously," said Carr. "What did he look like?"

"Then I fell back and he ran off. I didn't see what he looked like."

"Could it just have been a drunk?"

"No, of course it couldn't," Robinson said petulantly. "It's all tied up with all this. I know it is."

"Perhaps he was your conscience," Carr said, adding, as Robinson looked uncomprehending, "You know—one is smitten by one's conscience, or so they say."

"It's not a joke," Robinson muttered.

Carr smiled slightly. "It's certainly very odd," he said. "Still you're not hurt much, are you? I must be off now," he went on. "Did Lamplew propose anything, move a formal motion?"

"No, it was just in any other business he brought it up. No vote taken or anything. The old man squashed it. But it must be something to do with it, tied up somewhere . . ."

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'I'll see you tonight,' Carr said.

'Well, I'm seeing Alice.'

'Afterwards then.'

'I'm not meeting her till nine,' Robinson said, with some reluctance.

'Well, we'll have a drink altogether,' the elder man said firmly. 'I'll see you in the Gresham about 9.30—right?'

The girl, to Robinson's surprise, had telephoned him that morning to arrange a meeting. Their conversation had been brief and limited to the details of time and place, and once he had replaced the receiver he had thought no more about it. Now, as he returned to his office, he wondered momentarily what the girl's attitude to him would be, but with his tongue he was again worrying his cut gum, and his thoughts also returned to the incident of the blow.

Hargreaves was evidently disposed to conversation. His in-tray was empty and the file open on the desk in front of him was clearly there only in case he should have to appear to be working if someone in authority should enter the room. Before Robinson had sat down he started to talk. He talked about the war. Hargreaves had been in the army for six years, had attained the rank of captain, and had served in the Middle East, North Africa and on the Continent. He was 33; the rest of his life—even if there were another war—would be an anti-climax. He talked frequently of his experiences in uniform, social and martial; he hummed and whistled the soldiers' songs; the paper-weight on his desk was a shell fragment, the ashtray had been stolen from a Palestinian cabaret.

Robinson envied him his experiences, but this afternoon he found his conversation irritating beyond endurance, and kept his head lowered over the papers on his desk. Who? Why? When next?

It was a tradition of the office that the clerks and officials, as evidence of their conscientiousness, should

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delay their departure until a little after the normal finishing time, when the typists and office boys rushed from the building; but sharp at 5.15 Robinson picked up his raincoat and left.

It was an escape, but an escape to what? In the streets there were people, and in the queue for the bus and in the bus itself, and all were potential enemies. At home there were people too and their enmity was more dangerous, containing the ingredient of love.

'What have you been doing to your face, Martin?' his mother said.

He started guiltily. 'I think I've got a gum-boil, an abscess.'

'It's swollen. You'll have to see the dentist.'

'Yes, I will some time.'

'When can you go? You'll have to make an appointment.'

'Yes, I will.'

'Well, do it soon. When you get something like that the infection can spread all through your body.'

The intimacy of family, sensitive as membrane!

'They don't seem to be getting anywhere with this murder,' his father said, laying aside the evening paper. 'Only a paragraph in here tonight. "The police are continuing enquiries."'

'There's a girl at the office,' his sister said, 'who goes out with a policeman—you know, Mother, Gladys. She says he says they're taking hundreds of statements. They think it might be a sexual maniac.'

'They don't think anything of the sort.' Robinson was almost surprised to hear his own voice.

'They don't? I suppose you've been discussing it with the Chief Constable.' His sister smiled at him sarcastically.

'They're looking for her husband and the man who kept her. You'll believe anything, you will.'

As soon as the meal was finished he went to his bed-

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room. He threw himself on the bed and lay back, staring at the ceiling. With one hand he played with the lamp cord that hung down over the pillow, turning it around the lamp, and throwing the switchcase backwards and forwards. He drew in his breath deeply and shivered, his whole body trembling. The memory came to him of the relief of tears, but he could not cry.

Gradually his tension relaxed. He picked up a novel—it was a mildly salacious romance of Victorian London—and began to read. He read avidly with utter absorption, and it was with reluctance that finally he put down the book when it became time for him to go out.

The gas lamps of Pimlico had cast a more romantic glow. The girl beneath the neon was talking with a companion, but as Robinson came up she left her and took him by the arm.

‘Hullo,’ he said.

‘I’m sorry, Martin. Honestly, I’m sorry. I was upset, you know, on Sunday. We’d had such a lovely day. And then when you told me. I won’t let you down. It doesn’t matter now, all that. It’s over.’

He had nothing to say to her; there was nothing within him to respond to her nervous fervour. In Pimlico the taverns were erupting with strident vitality, and cries of pain and love echoed down dark passages.

‘Perhaps I shouldn’t have told you.’

‘No, I’m glad you told me. No, not glad, but it’s right that you should have told me. You need someone who can stand by you. I was a fool to take it like that. Nothing’s any good unless you have trust.’

He did not especially wish to tell her about the blow, but it occupied his mind and there was nothing else with which to fill the silence. He told her calmly.

‘Oh, your mouth,’ she said, ‘your poor mouth, let me see.’

‘It’s nothing. It’s not that.’ It’s not that it hurts that matters, but . . .

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She stopped under one of the lamps and put her hand up to his mouth. After a few seconds he turned away irritably.

'Oh, it's nothing. I tell you it doesn't hurt.'

'But who could it have been?'

'I don't know. Someone . . .'

'Is it to do with her?'

'I don't know.'

If she had met him coldly he might have been tender with her, but her capitulation was too complete, her protestations, like the self-accusation of a defeated enemy, faintly disgusted him.

'Where are we going?' the girl said.

'I've arranged to see a man in the Gresham.'

'Must we?' the girl said. 'I wanted to talk to you tonight, it's . . .'

'It's Carr. You seemed interested in him.'

'Carr?'

'He didn't take it seriously. He cracked about it.'

'What, cracked about what?'

'An unofficial strike,' he said. 'The chap who hit me, of course.'

They were still walking. Outside the cinema there was a queue, the waiting ones huddled together mutely, hopelessly, it seemed, as if no tickets would be issued until the Day of Judgement. Naphtha flares in the street markets, and the cabs rattling over the cobblestones.

When they had passed beyond the cinema, the girl gripped his arm tightly and turned towards him. 'Martin,' she said, 'don't worry so much. It's not as desperate as all that. Nothing really dreadful can happen.' She added with a rather hopeless attempt at lightness, 'You've still got me.'

'I'm not worrying,' he said petulantly.

Opposite, on the corner of the road, a tall man, hatless, was standing beneath a lamp-post. He appeared to be looking towards them, and Robinson, with a—for the

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instant—certain, consciousness of recognition, led the girl so that they would pass in front of him.

'Martin, I've been thinking a lot about it all since you told me,' the girl said carefully, ignoring the traffic, trusting him. 'For a while I felt so hurt I wasn't going to see you again; then I thought how much worse it must be for you. You see, I know you better than you think I do. I know . . .'

Tall and lean, like one, or like a thousand, but as they came to within a few yards of the stranger he stepped forward, smiling, to greet a woman in a fur coat. 'Darling, I'm so sorry I'm late . . .'

'We might as well be getting to the Gresham,' Robinson interrupted the girl. 'We can't just walk about.'

'You do treat me badly at times,' the girl went on bravely. 'But I don't think you mean to. I think you feel sorry afterwards, guilty . . .'

Tall men and lean men are legion, the boy thought; but he was looking at me.

'And I want to help you. I want it to be like it used to be before . . .'

But he was looking at me, looking at me. Robinson realized suddenly, however, that the woman's arrival would have been too opportune a coincidence, and, recognizing with a vague disquiet the absurdity of his identification, rejected it.

'I don't feel guilty, I've said that.' But had he said it to the girl or to some other? He felt again that sense of unreality, of a nightmarish impotence, and spoke to dispel it. 'We must be getting to the Gresham.'

Just before they reached the hotel he squeezed the girl's arm, trailed his hand against her buttocks, leant his head over on hers so that his cheek rested on her hair. He smelt her perfume, and experienced a pang of nostalgia, as might an old man sniffing again the scent of cut grass on the playing fields of his boyhood.

'I've brought Alice,' he said, as they came up to Carr.

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'I'm so glad,' the reporter said. 'I had hoped you would.'

He had taken her coat while Robinson, through habit, was looking around the room marking down the potential foes. Those who wore their own troubles openly could be disregarded, but the guarded ones who laughed shamelessly, and those with curious eyes, like mirrors, threatened danger. Carr had said something to the girl that had made her laugh politely, but Robinson observed that the reporter's expression was uneasy and the girl's smile tepid. For the first time—and with a quick elation—he saw that Carr's face, with its assured and mobile lines, was a work of self-construction; the adult confidence had been built up over the years; each wrinkle, each shallow and plane seemed a camouflage.

He said rudely: 'What's the joke? I wasn't listening.'

'Just a little pleasantry,' Carr said. 'Have you noticed how when one is at a meeting place first there's an unconscious tendency to play the host?'

'To make an impression?' said Robinson.

'Oh, no, it's not that. Just that, as the first, one has prepared the way.'

'I think it all depends on who the people are,' Robinson said, 'what they want from each other.'

'Or want to give?'

It was suddenly like a contest; there was a spirit of rivalry between them. Robinson could feel it, but could not understand it. They were two men with a woman, so each was playing for her regard; that was all he could see. He put his hand on the arm of the girl's chair; they were ranged together.

'Derek,' Robinson said, looking away, speaking rapidly as soon as he had lowered his glass, with the mark of it still on his upper lip. 'Derek, I've told Alice all about it. She's with me.' He put his tongue to the cut as he stopped speaking.

So there were the two of them, happily mated; the third

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outside, the lonely bachelor, to whom he could well afford to be pleasant!

'That's good,' Carr said absently.

Robinson looked up at him, but Carr was staring down into his glass, a triangle of perplexity between his eyebrows. When he did begin to speak it was to the girl, although his eyes were directed only approximately in her direction.

'I think you can help Martin, Alice. This is a terrifying thing for him to be involved in, enough to make any man doubt his . . . well, doubt whether all the values and rules he has lived by have meaning any more.'

'I see,' the girl said doubtfully.

It both annoyed and flattered Robinson to be discussed like this. It was as when his father and mother, sitting on each side of the fire while he slouched in a chair at the back of the room, had planned his future. Now they were the partners, and he the outsider.

'The ground has suddenly ceased to move under his feet,' Carr was saying. 'And that's where you can help, Alice. Nothing can ever be quite as it was, but what Martin needs . . .'

What do they understand of me?

'I mean Martin must be made to feel that the world turning beneath him is the same world turning . . .'

That abstraction created by his parents' words could not be identified with the rough-jowled youth, fingering a pimple on his forehead, whose adolescent pride made him revolt against any assumptions that compromised his uniqueness.

'Call it guilt; anxiety, perhaps, more exactly . . .' Carr was looking at him steadily now, though talking towards the girl.

'You keep talking about guilt,' Robinson said suddenly. 'I'm not guilty, not of anything, I mean.' Was he talking to Carr or to his parents? 'You speak about me as if I was, as if I was . . .'

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Carr was looking at him with an expression that resembled pity, and it confused Robinson. 'I'm not responsible for what anyone else may do. Can I . . .'

He had forgotten what he had intended to say. Carr's gaze confounded him utterly: so a doctor might look at a patient to whom he had given consoling words in the teeth of death. 'And when it is all cleared up it will be all right,' he finished weakly.

The girl was not looking at him nor at anyone at all. Did she also know that he was going to die?

ROBINSON came downstairs shortly before mid-day. His father and sister were at work and he had waited until he had heard his mother go out before leaving his room. To be in the house at that time on a week-day was a novelty, and he moved about the rooms restlessly, seeing them with a fresh eye. It was like visiting—not a strange town—but a district where before one had been only on duty, but is now touring at leisure. He went into the scullery and drank a glass of water. The cat was on the rug in front of the fire in the dining-room, and he stooped to stroke it, but his head throbbed again as the blood ran into it and he straightened quickly. He turned on the wireless and then turned it off again.

It had been raining and although it had stopped there was a constant dripping from the trees. The sky was grey and low. Leaves rotted on the path. In the evening there would be fog.

Robinson pressed his forehead against the cold glass of the window. A laundry van stood at one of the houses opposite, and at the corner two housewives were talking; one carried an umbrella, and as she shook it and they both looked down at it, he knew they were talking of the weather.

He was still in his pyjamas with a dressing-gown over them. He pulled a chair up to the fire and sat down to look at a newspaper. It had become instinctive in the three weeks since the murder for him to scan any paper which came into his possession to see whether it contained a report; had the name McCarless appeared it would have had the same immediate frightening familiarity as his own name. He began to read the sports page, but soon threw the paper aside. Though his head did not ache unless he moved quickly, stooped, or blew his nose, there

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was a sense of pressure above his eyes. He still felt slightly sick; his eyes smarted and his mouth was dry.

His mother, he knew, would complete her shopping and return within an hour. The lunch was already on the stove; a faint smell of onions percolated from the kitchen. He felt that this hour of solitude should in some way be put to good account but he did not know what to do.

Briefly as he sat, his feet stretched wide in the hearth so that the fire's heat struck at the base of him, he recalled deliberately memories of his sexual abandonment with the dead woman. So, when she had been still alive, he had excited himself between their meetings. Now, all was cold inside him and dead. Only a sense of deprivation, of an irretrievable loss remained.

The fire's heat began to burn his shins through his thin pyjamas; he levered his chair to one side and put his feet up on the tiles by the fireplace. He felt a vague uneasiness at being in the house at this unnatural time, and—illogically, as one day's absence for sickness was never commented upon—worry as to the consequences at the office of his malingering.

Anxiety is contagious, polluting all the processes of the mind. Now recollection of the previous night brought a fresh alarm.

With Carr he had gone to the nearby city—the same city from which he and the girl had sailed to the green island—and from early in the evening until midnight they had voraciously visited hotels, pubs and clubs, forcing down liquor with an ever-increasing urgency. Starting with slow pints of beer in quiet hotel bars, they had, under Carr's direction, turned to the taverns around the station—a quick drink in one and then on to the next, starting a conversation here with a sailor, another in the next house with the barmaid, then on again—and later to the dives in the dock area, where they sang to accordions and the harpies lined the benches by the lavatories. At closing-time they had taken a taxi to a club, the purpose of life

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concentrated on the necessity of maintaining the movement and from there to another in a basement where the coloured men and the white girls danced.

Now Robinson's memories of the evening were kaleidoscopic, order and perspective shattered. The early part of the evening he could picture clearly: the places they had visited, the people to whom they had spoken and the subjects of their talk—talk that had been general, unanalytical, superficial and brisk as a queue conversation. Then it began to break up: a face, a phrase, a bar, a lamp-post at a street corner appeared out of context, isolated, removed from time; he tried to place the events of the later evening in their natural sequence, but the gaps were lost, lost for ever, gone like a dream that leaves only a taste in the mouth, sweat on the hands.

It was this that alarmed him. What had been said and done? He would never know. A piece of living had been lost.

He had no recollection of their going home, of how he had entered the house. He had awoken in his pyjamas in his own bed—he had felt too ill to get up—his clothes in a rumpled heap on the floor.

Remembering this, Robinson went upstairs to fetch his shoes, and brought them down to brush them. His head still hurt at any sudden movement, but he cleaned and polished them with an excessive meticulousness, rubbing them over and over again.

At about the same time, Carr was sitting alone in a public-house near his office. The tables had been freshly polished and the beer mats were unstained. The glass in front of him was three-quarters full.

That day, as always after a night of intemperance, he felt as if purged, the chastened flesh subdued, like an ascetic's. His hands were cold and the skin on his face was drawn. There was a kind of fragility about him that led to

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delicacy of movement and a detached attitude, the fronds of his thought gently bourgeoning in contemplation.

His recollections of the previous evening were fuller than Robinson's but not complete. Unlike the younger man he enjoyed the lack of entirety. The incidents that he could remember partially had in their very indefiniteness a special charm, and it stimulated his imagination and amused him to try to reconstruct the pattern of the evening from the elements of it which were visible through the alcoholic fog.

Carr admitted now the obsessive force which Robinson exerted on him. As he sat, sipping a glass of light ale, he examined it calmly and fastidiously. It seemed to him that at this moment he had a unique perception of his motives.

There had, he thought, been a significant accumulation of incidents: his response to the blatant appeal of the woman when he had seen her in the hotel—had she already the beguiling emanation of death around her?—; his subsequent meetings with Robinson, and the revelation that had come to him of the complementary character of their natures (the possibility of a latent homosexual attraction he considered but rejected, without distaste); then his coincidental meeting with the girl, that had introduced another element and had involved him the more intimately with Robinson. Now, he thought, he could identify himself with the boy, could feel as he felt, could, merely by willing it as one wills one's arm to move, direct and control him.

Is it that now I am growing so old and tired in spirit I have to live vicariously? That the only way in which I can experience again the undiluted passions of youth, the excitement and the terror, is by inhabiting him?

Even this, in his mood of philosoph-alcohol-ic detachment, he could consider without disquietude.

But what comes now? For what consummation am I waiting? For the first time he felt troubled; the clarity of

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his understanding was smeared over, as by condensation on a window. There was something there, a dark shape beyond the pane, but its details he could not distinguish, and the answer that came to him, that came to him in words—'to get it out of my system'—was not satisfactory. The words repeated themselves in his mind so that they became meaningless. He drank a little of the ale.

Was he investing it all with too much significance, he wondered. He ran his fingers lightly over his forehead. All thought is rationalization. The most simple human processes can be turned in the mind's distorting mirror into reflections grotesque or sublime. Am I merely playing a mental game, as when I was a child I constructed in the safe warmth of the kitchen strange and fascinating worlds of romance and eccentricity in which I had godlike powers?

'Wotcher,' the detective said. He stood in the doorway smiling at Carr.

'Wotcher. What are you going to have?'

'What a life you reporters have! I'll have a mixed.'

When he had sat down Holmes said, 'Nice in here.'

'I am a little, a little'—Carr touched his head lightly and closed his eyes—'this morning.'

'On the beer last night? You reporters get around.'

'You put it very crudely, but, yes, on the beer.'

'Young Robinson,' the detective said. 'You've been seeing a lot of him lately.'

There was silence.

'Well?' said the detective.

Carr smiled blandly. 'I wasn't aware you had asked me a question.'

'Looking for a story?'

'No, no, no,' Carr said. 'People have a mistaken idea. They think journalists are always journalists. We do have private lives, you know. It's not the job all the time. Not like detectives, or perhaps like detectives, I wouldn't know. We like going to the pictures and filling in pools coupons,

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and, and cultivating our gardens, in a manner of speaking.'

'I see,' the detective said. 'Nothing to do with Jean McCarless?'

'I didn't say that,' Carr said. 'Call it psychological interest—you know, like on the pictures.'

'In a boy who might be a murderer?'

'Oh, now, don't be absurd,' Carr said. 'You know very well he isn't.'

When the detective did not speak, he added, 'Don't you?'

'I pass,' Holmes said. 'They seem to have had something like a row outside the Gresham and on the way to her place. A couple of people have come forward, said they seemed to be struggling, or they might have been making love.'

'Struggling with a mounting passion, evidently,' Carr said, and waited for the detective to laugh.

'Good company, is he?' Holmes said.

'I find him so, quite.'

The detective emptied his glass. 'You wouldn't be interfering with the course of justice at all, would you?' he said pleasantly.

'Don't frighten me,' Carr said. 'I'm shaky this morning. You mustn't upset me. What a dreadful suggestion! I don't quite follow you anyway; I don't see how I could. Can you give me any hints?'

'I've got to go,' the detective said. 'I can't sit around pubs all morning nursing a hangover.'

'Justice must be done though the heavens fall,' Carr said vaguely, as the detective moved towards the door. 'By the way, why was he beaten up?'

'Beaten up?' Holmes turned round. 'What are you talking about?'

'Oh, someone hit him one night,' Carr said. 'Robinson, I mean. It must have been a drunk.'

'Where was this?'

Carr told him and then allowed the detective to depart.

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He was alone again with his glass, and it seemed to him suddenly that he was taking part in an elaborate game without meaning or hope of reward. Somewhere else real life was going on but here and around him all was make-believe. A eunuch, he thought, might feel similarly as he organized the administration of the harem.

Robinson had been shifting restlessly in the darkness and now he turned to the girl and said, 'Let's go.' She picked up her bag and followed him out, squeezing past the knees, muttering 'Excuse me' and 'Thank you.' As they reached the top of the gangway she turned to catch a last glimpse of the screen: the three figures on it formed the lines of a triangle; a woman was bending over the wounded man in the dusk and behind them, leaning forward from the shadows, stood another man whose brow glistened with sweat; faintly there was the music of a guitar playing a jaunty, nostalgic tune. The girl paused for a moment and then followed Robinson out into the light of the foyer.

He had been restless all day; unable, since he had polished his shoes, to see anything through to its completion. He had partially dressed, and then he came downstairs again to write a letter, but screwed up the paper and threw it into the fire after he had covered half a sheet. He picked up a magazine, began to read an article and then put it aside. He washed and then smoked a cigarette before he shaved.

He had told his mother that he was taking a day's leave. He felt strangely frightened to talk, as if were he to open his mouth unbidden words might come to his lips as to those of a patient under an anæsthetic.

Lunch—there were only the two of them—was a meal of uneasy silence. He forced himself to eat, conscious of his pallor and his reddened eyes. With his mother he experienced again that sense of guilt he had known years before, when the first stirrings of the flesh in the night's long hours

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had tormented him. It was in a spirit of propitiation that he helped her to wash the dishes.

Nothing of significance had been said.

'You look tired. You're not getting enough sleep these days. You want to go to bed earlier.'

He had muttered something in reply.

And: 'You haven't brought Alice round lately. Is she all right?' She had meant: are things all right between you?

'Oh, yes, she's quite all right.'

The weight of the dead afternoon had been oppressive. Again he experienced the childhood parallel: it was like being away from school with a cold. There was nothing to do and no-one to play with. In another room his mother was using the vacuum cleaner; its monotonous whirring continued in his head after she had turned it off. He breathed on the window and drew little figures on the glass, then he rubbed it clear. He began to sort out some old letters—a task he had been intending to attend to for some weeks—but after destroying a few of them, he began to read those he picked up, a paragraph here, a sheet there, all the time recalling, tasting again, the memories which they evoked. There was no fire in his room and he grew cold.

It was not quite dark when he went out. He walked along the beach. There had been a high tide and the flotsam had been borne up close to the dunes. He kicked at the bottles, the tins and decaying fruits among the seaweed, and would stoop sometimes—until it grew too dark—to pick up some carton and read the label.

When he returned his sister was home. 'Gentleman of leisure today, are you?'

He went up to his room to go through his letters again, but picked up a book, opened it at random and sprawled on the bed, reading, until he was called to his meal. That had passed in a negative kind of peace, with the tinny dance music from the radio precluding all but the most sketchy conversation.

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After the meal, still restless in his vacuum, he went round to the girl's house. Already the bonfires stained the sky. She had been upstairs.

'It is nice to see you again, Martin,' Mrs. Rydings said. 'Would you like a cup of tea?'

The girl came downstairs, wearing a sweater and an old skirt that was stained, her face bare of make-up. 'I can't come out tonight, Martin. I'm going to wash my hair.'

'There's a film at the Odeon . . .'

'But I've been putting it off for days.'

'You've always said you like films with . . .'

'Well, you'll have to wait while I change.'

He stood in the empty, gleaming foyer waiting for her to come up to him. They had come out in the middle of the film.

'It's bloody awful, silly,' Robinson said.

'It was well acted,' the girl said.

'Oh, yes, it was well acted.'

As they pushed back the heavy glass doors and went into the street the distant crackle of fireworks greeted them.

'Of course, it's Guy Fawkes Day,' the girl said, with enthusiasm, feigned or actual, in her voice.

She said, as they crossed over the road by the War Memorial: 'There was going to be a big one on the beach, it said in the paper.'

They walked towards the beach, a space between them. Suddenly there was a series of rapid explosions and a flash under their feet; children laughed.

'Oh God,' Robinson said, starting, 'damn them.'

'I think fireworks are exciting, bonfire day,' the girl said quickly. 'When we were little Dad always built a bonfire in the back. There was Mrs. Clark one year and we'd all, it was nearly over, lighting the last ones, and there was one, you see we'd tried to light it before and it hadn't burned, picked it up, Mrs. Clark, I mean, picked it up and lit it, and it wasn't the sort. Of course, she couldn't know

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poor old thing, wasn't the sort you hold, and it went off in her hand.

'She was really very lucky,' the girl added, against the wall of his uninterest. 'It frightened her, of course, and burnt her hand, but it didn't hurt her badly.'

They walked on in silence to the promenade. From there they could see the bonfire at the foot of the pier. They walked over the sand towards it. Tongues of flame flickered red in the misty air and a column of smoke ascended in yellow spirals; but it was almost all over. The figures silhouetted against the fire somehow seemed forlorn and waif-like, and there were intervals between the explosions of individual fireworks. Some youths were roasting potatoes in the ashes and outside the circle of the light there was giggling.

'I've got sand in my shoes,' Robinson said.

For a while they watched in a bored silence, while the children squabbled around their feet.

'It's all a matter of nerve,' Robinson said suddenly.

A tubular firework, wrapped in dark blue paper, lay on the sand near a box a few feet in front of them. Robinson walked to it, picked it up, took a lighter from his pocket, flicked it and held it to the firework, his body obscuring his actions from the girl. His face shone redly in the glow from the fire. He held the firework at arm's length from him. His teeth were set tightly, his lips drawn back and his eyes were reduced to slits in his face. The firework exploded in his hand with a great flash of light. He held the case for a second or so and then threw it high into the bonfire.

His expression was exultant as he turned back to the girl. 'It was one of those "do not hold",' he said. '"Do not hold." You saw it, didn't you? It just went off and then there was the bang, and I didn't know. It was like holding a gun to your head with one bullet in it and turning it round and pulling the trigger. Russian roulette. Do you remember in the café Derek told us about it, or

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Russian something? I didn't know. There was the bang and my hand was still there and that was it.'

A moment after speaking he began to cry. His features, however, were not distorted, and his expression seemed to express surprise rather than anguish.

The girl took his arm and led him away from the fire over the wet, clinging sand into the darkness. Neither of them spoke until he had dried his eyes and face with a handkerchief.

His attempts to justify himself appeared purely automatic, a surface response to which he gave little attention. 'Reaction, it must have been. Chaps had it after the war, after being in action. Silly, a silly thing to do anyway.'

Apart from his tears, he appeared quite calm. The girl still held his arm. Suddenly he turned to her and, his voice even, only a hoarseness, an unnecessary quietness, indicating his tension, said: 'Alice, I can't go on. Alice, I can't go on.'

She made feminine sounds, movements of comfort, against the broken phrases of his debacle. He did not, of course, think of it at that moment, but frequently in the past he had accused the girl of lacking a sense of humour.

'And then what can I do? I just can't go on. Something's got to happen. Looking at me and thinking and saying, they know, everyone knows now. And there they are at home, and at the office, and at the Gresham . . .'

'It'll be all right, Martin. All right, Martin. All right!'

He broke away from her and walked off blindly, exhaling noisily and irregularly. From behind them a rocket hissed into the air; above their heads three single white stars fell from it, slowly and quietly like soap bubbles, fell against the indigo sky, fell and separately went out.

He had walked from the girl at the moment at which shame in its ordinary, every-day form had overwhelmed him. She came up behind him quickly, and, her heel turning over in the sand, tumbled against him.

He was blushing in the darkness. This shame came from

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a nightmare; beside it all past failures of confidence, all humiliations and self-betrayals appeared mere gaucheries. He had to get away; even the darkness was not sufficient covering for his nakedness. He pushed the girl off and began to run. Only when he splashed into a channel did he realize that he was going towards the sea. He turned, slipping where the sand was loose, running bent as if his body were a target to be compressed into the smallest possible space. Somewhere the girl was calling. He could still hear her as he reached the dunes. He clambered over them and then along a groyne to the promenade, scraping his hands. Under the street lights he stopped running.

CARR, the bland, avuncular man of the world, tolerant observer of human vanities, dispassionate dialectician, was saying: 'One of the penalties of our calling is that we should have to associate with the people's elected representatives, democracy being, of course, the rule of the lowest common multiple. You should not use such language about them, George; it is not their fault. The members of our Council Chamber have a basic realism that you and I lack. They appreciate in their simple, peasant fashion the folly of idealism, the charm of hypocrisy, the wisdom . . .'

'There's a lady in the front office to see you, Mr. Carr,' the office boy interrupted.

' . . . of self-deception and the essential principle that good taste is bad brass. They are, in brief, as lovable a set of bastards as you will meet anywhere, short of, say, the House of Commons, or one of Fleet Street's more popular taverns.' Carr straightened himself off the table edge. 'Who is she?' he asked the boy.

'I don't know, she didn't say.'

'You should try to cultivate humility and a kindly affection for your fellow men,' Carr said, leaving the room.

The girl was standing away from the counter, self-consciously attempting to make herself inconspicuous. When Carr said, 'Oh, hullo,' casually and without concealing his surprise, she coloured slightly and her smile was an inadequate response. As he ducked under the flap of the counter she had time in which to recover.

'Hullo,' Carr said again. 'This is nice. How are you?'

'Very well, thank you,' the girl said. 'How are you?'

'Enduring,' Carr said, 'enduring.'

There was a brief pause.

'Is there anything?' Carr began. 'Can I . . .'

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'I wanted to talk to you,' the girl said. Her fingers were twisting the strap of her handbag.

'Good,' Carr said. 'I'm delighted, flattered and delighted. Shall we go and have a coffee? Just a minute; I'll get my coat.'

When they were in the street he said, 'Any preference?' The girl said she did not mind where they went, and Carr said, 'There's Ramsey's. Will that suit?' And then he asked her if she had seen the show at the Palace. She had not, so he told her about the comedian, and elaborated on the art of comedy in general.

The café was chintzy, with polished warming-pans on the walls. The girl's unease was so apparent that Carr treated her delicately, though he felt a rising sense of excitement, like a cricketer awaiting his turn to bat as he sees the earlier wickets fall.

After their coffees had been brought, he said, 'Well?' raising his eyebrows quizzically, twisting his mouth ruefully, 'it's about Martin, I suppose.'

He admired the patent effort the girl made. She looked into his eyes, and then said steadily: 'I've got to do something about him.'

'Yes,' Carr said encouragingly, but with a suggestion of a questioning reserve.

The girl's next words surprised him. 'I think you are bad for him,' she said.

He only raised his eyebrows again.

Still calmly, she went on: 'It sounds a fearful cheek, I know, but I think the way you are influencing him now is bad for him. I know what he is. He isn't very . . . very stable. He can't stand up to trouble. He's just weak and . . .'

Carr said, after brief thought, 'My dear girl,' in a tone of paternal surprise.

The girl said stonily: 'I was watching him when you were there and he was different.'

Carr said, 'Really.'

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The girl's control wavered. 'Oh, I'm not blaming you at all,' she said. 'Don't think that at all, please don't think that. It's just that he's younger than you and he admires you and . . .'

Carr said: 'I don't understand. I don't understand at all. Am I such a malignant influence? Tell me in what role you see me—a vampire sucking his blood, as an elderly debauchee, or a devil's advocate?'

'I don't mean that at all,' the girl said. 'Oh, please don't think that. It's just that . . .'

'Well, what is it just?'

'I don't know quite,' the girl said. 'It's just that I feel . . . He cried last night.'

'How extraordinary,' Carr said. 'But I assure you it wasn't my doing. I didn't stick pins in his picture or incant a spell.'

It seemed to him as if the girl hovered between anger and a willingness to smile. He felt for the moment an uncomplicated, natural liking for her.

'Listen, my dear,' he said, putting his hand flat down on the table, just by her arm. 'We're on the same side in this. We both want to help him. I admire you very much for your efforts on Martin's behalf, but you can't expect me to agree with you, can you?'

'I could argue, perhaps, that you are a bad influence on him, that your very niceness is like a goad in his flank—but we won't get anywhere going on like that.' He picked up his cup and emptied it. 'Would you like another coffee?'

The girl shook her head.

'Let's walk a little,' Carr said. 'Talking's easier when you're not looking into one another's faces.'

Outside, Carr said casually, 'How long have you known Martin?'

A woman with a shopping basket came between them. 'Oh, years, I don't know.'

He touched her arm lightly to halt her at the curb as a lorry clattered by, and, as they crossed the road, for a moment tasted—briefly, as one tastes a morsel of food that

falls on to the tongue from a cavity in a tooth, before spitting it out—the thought of making love to the girl; or rather the thought of their being lovers, sentimentally and without sophistication, like the couple now on the pavement in front of them, holding hands as they looked into the window of the furniture shop.

‘It seems as if I’ve always known him,’ the girl said, ‘but of course we haven’t always been going out together.’

That is no country for old men, Carr thought, with self-pity. The young in one another’s arms, birds in the trees, fish, flesh, or fowl, commend whatever is begotten, born and dies.

‘Well, when did you start going out?’ he said, uttering the phrase with distaste.

‘It was when he did his National Service. When he came home on leave. I suppose before then he was just a kid, or I thought he was; well, we both were really.’

And then I was not old either, Carr thought.

‘At first I don’t think I was very keen, but—you know what it is—he was in uniform and he only came home every so often. He had other girls, of course, and I went out with other boys sometimes. Perhaps he wasn’t really in love with me, but he, I suppose, wanted to have a girl like the other boys. And perhaps me too. We became more or less engaged.’

She paused and then continued more slowly: ‘I think I’ve known for a long time that he doesn’t love me, perhaps I’ve known it ever since I began to love him.’

Love, Carr thought, a word in the mouth of a child, learned from a novel or the cinema screen. He said, ‘You are very young to be so wise, my dear.’

His tone was just ironic, but some quality of insight in her avowal troubled him, destroying as it did his preconception about the superficiality of her emotions; for he thought he was a man who disliked being the cause of pain in others, except when, for particular reasons, it became essential for his own gratification.

They were turning between thick privet hedges into the park. The mist in the early winter air seemed to have concentrated there, softening all outlines, deadening noise, so as faintly to create distortions, the sense of a smaller world in which intimacy came easily. He deliberately walked wide of the girl, as they went forward silently among the dead leaves into the still centre, both for the time being absorbed in their own thoughts.

It became hard to break the silence. 'The ducks are still on the pond,' Carr said.

The girl said, 'You don't think much of us, do you?'

'I beg your pardon.'

'Because we're so young, you think nothing can be very serious to us, that it's all like a children's game. Like parents who never understand, only you aren't really so old.'

'How wrong you are,' Carr said emphatically. 'I know only too well that the splendours and miseries of youth are more intense, more important, than anything—except tragedy—that ever happens to one afterwards. Good heavens, yes.'

'You say that.'

'And, my dear, I believe it most strongly. Why Juliet and Helen were bobby-soxers! What is called calf-love is love in its most passionate, its quintessential form. We make a mockery of youth and its emotions today by cossetting youngsters, treating hulking youths who should be the heads of families like ten-year-olds, teaching girls who should have had at least two babies, history, geography, civics and enough arithmetic to enable them to fill in their football coupons. It is true, however, that the young do not realize that time always heals.'

On one level he believed all that he said, but he remembered he had admitted it to be so when his wife had once told him that he was at his most deceitful when he replied to a personal statement with generalizations.

'But still you don't take us seriously,' the girl persisted.

'But of course I do. That's what I'm telling you, that's

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why I'm trying to help you. Why else should I try to help Martin if I didn't take it seriously?'

'I don't know,' the girl said slowly. 'I wish I did. Whatever it is, I know you don't . . . I mean him and me; you don't take that into account at all, do you?'

And she looked up at him for the first time since they had begun to walk. Carr remembered how he had first seen her by the platform of the bus, but now her nose was red and shining, the skin of her cheeks translucent in the damp and cold, like the shell of a duck's egg.

She said suddenly—had his recollection of their first meeting, without words, without a sign, made her too remember?—'That woman, how is she?'

He knew instantly what she meant. 'She died,' he said. 'They thought she was getting better after they had operated but she had a sudden relapse and died.'

They skirted the pond. Two children were throwing stones at the branches of a tree to knock down the last horse-chestnuts.

The woman had died, and somewhere the spell had been broken. The mist on this side of the water seemed thinner. Carr knew the girl would say nothing more of consequence. He felt dishevelled, his skin itching.

'I don't want to rush you,' he said, 'but I have to get back to work. The mighty presses must be kept turning.'

'Oh, I'm sorry,' the girl said.

'Not at all. It's been delightful,' Carr said politely. 'No, I don't mean that really. I mean that I am glad we have talked. Believe me, I shall remember all you have said.'

Their parting was suitably indeterminate. A woman who knew the girl stopped her to talk. Carr stood by for a moment, unintroduced, and then, raising his hat, said, 'I must be on my way, Alice. Good-bye.'

She said, 'Oh, good-bye.'

'Gin,' the man in the brown shirt said, 'gives one an

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extraordinary clarity of vision. I can see the two paths stretching in front of me, and—free-will and all that—I can proceed along either. One leads to a lonely, miserable, undarned, drink-swilling bachelordom; the other to suburban domesticity with a drab who has long ceased to appeal to me—and, of course, vice versa—and a couple of unlikeable children, on whose account I am reduced to not having two pennies to rub together.'

Carr laughed. 'Fortunately, there's always a third path,' he said.

'No, old man, no, positively not. I can't see it in the gin.'

'But, yes,' said Carr. 'It leads to the gas oven, or over the fresh-smelling downs to Beachy Head, or to the gunsmith's, the back-street chemist's shop, or . . .'

'That's one prejudice I retain from my Catholic upbringing,' the man in the brown shirt said. 'There can be no justification for self-destruction; the whole point of the joke would be lost. Life would be like a dirty limerick without the last line. That's good, isn't it? An epigram, you see, you see?'

'You're just a superstitious Papist at bottom,' Carr said benevolently. 'The bare bodkin gives more point—if you'll pardon the pun—to a quietus than the casual, arbitrary skidding of a bus, the bomb that just didn't miss. Why should we not choose the manner and moment of our deaths? Why should we not choose death instead of life? For all life longs for the last day.'

'What are your views on the ethics of suicide, Martin?' he added, turning to Robinson.

The man in the brown shirt spoke before Robinson could answer. 'The desirability or otherwise of the state of death is not the point. You are . . .'

'Point-blank, obviously,' said Carr.

' . . . not so simple that you don't know better than that. Of course, death is preferable to life—that is one of the things gin tells you. But—damn it—you play rugby . . .'

'I don't,' Carr interjected. 'I watch it.'

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'It's all the same. The rules of the game, old man. You've got to stick to the rules of the game. You can't have all the team blowing their own bloody whistles for no side.'

'It is what I said,' Carr declared. 'You are still a Papist. Your referee was immaculately conceived . . .'

'I think'—both the elder men turned to look at Robinson as he spoke—'I think that if everyone had just a button or something in their arms which they could just press and they would die, there would be a lot more suicides.'

'But what dreams may come,' said Carr. 'You really believe that, Martin?'

'But that isn't really the point at all,' said the man in the brown shirt. He put his hand to his head. 'I've forgotten what the point is. My vision has become blurred. Who's going to buy me another gin?'

'It's your bloody round,' Carr said.

They had been on the settee in each other's arms for some time, but Robinson had derived no pleasure from it. Their embraces had been sterile, and both had made their movements as if taking part in a ritual in which they no longer had faith.

He removed his arm from the girl's back and lit a cigarette.

'Shall I put on the light?' she said.

He made no answer until she began to rise to do so, and then he said shortly, 'No, it's all right as it is.'

The darkness was better.

The girl said, 'What's the time? They'll be home soon after ten.'

She stood up and put coal on the fire. As she sat again her thigh brushed against Robinson and he moved irritably.

She said, 'Give me a cigarette,' though she seldom smoked. She held the cigarette awkwardly between straight fingers.

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'What did you do last night?' the girl asked.

'Had a few drinks.'

'Did you see Catr?'

'Yes,' Robinson said.

'Did he tell you he'd seen me?' She asked the question with a studied casualness.

'No,' Robinson said discouragingly.

He was slouched in the corner of the settee. The girl was sitting forward looking into the fire.

She said, 'What do you, why do you keep seeing him, Martin?'

'When did you see him?' Robinson said.

'I just bumped into him. He took me for a coffee at Ramsey's.'

Robinson made no comment.

'Why do you?' the girl said.

He shrugged in the darkness. 'Why not?'

'I don't think you ought to see so much of him. I mean, he's . . .' She broke off.

He felt too heavy, too tired, to argue. 'Derek's all right.'

'It's only since this trouble started,' the girl said. 'What I can't understand is why he should want to interfere like this.'

'He's not interfering.'

'He is,' the girl said. 'It's—I don't know—it's unhealthy. Why doesn't he mind his own business? It's not his affair.'

'He's a reporter, you know,' Robinson said.

'But it isn't that. It's something else. He didn't know her, you say?'

'No, he didn't know her.'

He was indifferent to what she thought. The urge to self-justification was strong within him, but he knew that she loved him so that to her all his failures were irrelevant; that would make confession meaningless. Only, her persistence irritated him. Whatever else she could not give him, she should, he felt, provide peace.

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Neither the girl's love nor her pity would restrain her. 'What did you talk about?' she said.

'What did we talk about! How should I know? Anything, nothing. You do keep on, for Heaven's sake drop it.'

The girl turned to him as if to speak again but said nothing.

They sat in silence until she said, 'It's nearly ten. You'd better be going if you don't want to stay for supper.'

'All right,' Robinson said.

He did not get up immediately. Peace was not in that room, but it offered a kind of refuge and he was reluctant to leave. Eventually, he rose, combed his hair, wiped the lipstick from his mouth. Once he had possessed a kind of boyish charm.

'Carr told me that woman died,' the girl said.

He had no idea what she meant, and when he turned towards her blankly she made a gesture of annoyance. 'The woman who was knocked down by the bus,' she said.

'Did she?' Robinson said. 'Bad luck.'

The detective wasted no words. He cautioned Robinson and then he said: 'We have evidence that you were in Mrs. McCarless's room on the night she was killed. Do you wish to amend your statement? You are not obliged to say anything.'

Robinson heard and understood what was said to him but the words had no special significance.

He began to lie automatically. 'In her room? No, I left her at the gate. There must be some mistake.'

The detective, whose manner was more brusque than at the previous interview, repeated: 'We have evidence that you went to her room with her at about 10.30 p.m., and that you remained until the early hours of the morning.'

'It's not true. I assure you, I . . .'

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'Where did you go when you left her?'

'Where did I go? Why, home, I . . .'

'So you would have been home at about 11 o'clock?'

'No, yes, that's right.'

He saw the trap as he stepped into it and was almost relieved to be able to capitulate.

The detective said, 'We shall be able to confirm that, of course, from your family.'

His attempt at escape was only half-hearted. 'Well, I don't suppose they'll be able to remember just one night like that.'

'We can try,' the detective said.

'All right. I did go up then.'

'Would you care to explain why you made a false statement previously?'

'I didn't want to get mixed up in anything, I suppose. It was natural. I knew it was wrong, but . . .'

'You didn't want to get mixed up in a murder enquiry?'

This time he did not see the trap, or, perhaps, like the fox wearied by the chase that in the end takes the easy track the hounds can follow, disdained precaution, facilitated his destruction. 'That's right. I think it was natural.'

'But at that stage you did not know that a murder had taken place.'

Robinson said nothing.

'Did you?' said the detective.

'Did you?' he repeated, when Robinson remained silent.

'What time did you leave?'

'I don't know quite, about half-past two.'

'In your statement you denied intimacy with the deceased. What were you doing between 10.30 and 2.30?'

'That wasn't true,' Robinson said. 'We did . . .' He broke off.

'We'll go through your statement,' the detective said, 'and you can tell us what else wasn't true.'

He was questioned for three-and-a-half hours. By the

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end of the interrogation he was emotionally numb and bewildered. His unease was not diminished by the detective's final revelation that the police had been aware of his first story's falsity almost as soon as he had told it, for this suggested that more disclosures might be made in the unpredictable future, that further abysses might open under his stumbling feet.

MORE than ever the bed was sanctuary. Each night now as he lay his head upon the pillows and extinguished the light he experienced a positive physical sense of relief. In the darkness and the warmth the fears and humiliations of the day became as insubstantial as dreams. Sleep was reality and the waking world fantasy. Each night he fell into a heavy, absolute sleep. Instantly on waking he was oppressed by fear and anxiety, like a child on the day which is to bring some long foreseen ordeal. He would burrow more deeply into the bed-clothes in an attempt to regain admission to the innocent world of oblivion.

His mother called him three times; on the last occasion with impatience, pulling away the clothes that covered his face and slamming the door behind her.

As she went down the stairs he shouted out to her viciously, 'There's no need for that.'

It was only just growing light. The air was raw, and the jug of water in the bathroom was barely luke-warm. Ice had formed on the edges of the windows. While shaving he cut his chin.

When he came downstairs he said: 'The water was stone-cold. You know I can't shave in cold water. I've gone and cut myself.'

'It was hot when I took it up,' his mother said. 'You should get up when I call you.'

'That's another thing'—Robinson's voice was raised—'there's no need to wake me like that, slamming doors.'

She turned away from him. 'You got out of bed on the wrong side this morning, my boy.'

But he was spoiling for trouble. 'I don't want any breakfast. I'm late now. I've spent ten minutes trying to stop this bleeding.'

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His mother returned from the kitchen with the teapot and a plate of porridge. 'Eat your breakfast. Five minutes won't make any difference.'

'I tell you I don't want any breakfast. I haven't time. I don't want any breakfast. I don't want any breakfast. Is that clear?'

His mother put the pot and plate sharply down on the table. 'Don't talk to your mother like that,' she said with asperity.

'I've had enough,' he said. 'I've had enough.'

The blood had mounted to his face. As he picked up his coat and hat he could scarcely hear his mother's reproaches. He slammed the front door against her angry words. Walking to the bus stop he was muttering to himself.

Snow was in the air. The sky's sullenness was reflected on the faces of those waiting for their buses. With scarves and coats drawn over their chins, their breaths visible as smoke, they stamped ill-humouredly. Robinson obtained a seat next to a man with a liquid catarrhal cough, who spat intermittently into his handkerchief.

Robinson was still venomous. The scene with his mother obsessed him. He developed their quarrel, inventing rejoinders, or, with self-pity, toyed with fantasy situations, in which his mother would be grief-stricken for her harshness to him.

When he entered the office, Hargreaves said: 'Late on parade this morning, chum.'

If he were to be arrested, tried, convicted, that smug, petty home would be shattered. As he sat over his files he prolonged the fantasy, investing it with intricate detail. Mid-way through the morning he was mildly reprimanded by the chief clerk for an earlier error of omission. After that the office became involved in his melodrama. Arriving in the morning, excited, whispering groups around the open newspapers—he could see them and hear them—and, later, their anxious absorbed faces as from the back

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of the court they watched him, pale but defiant, in the dock.

'What happened to you yesterday afternoon?' Hargreaves said. 'Under the M.O.?'

'I was at police headquarters,' Robinson said deliberately.

'Helping them out with their murder or something?'

'Yes, as a matter of fact, I was,' Robinson replied histrionically.

'Ha, ha.'

Robinson was disappointed. 'I knew the woman, you know,' he said.

'Did you, by God?' said Hargreaves casually.

Robinson knew he had said too much already, but could not stop. 'I was with her the night before she was killed.'

This time Hargreaves displayed a gratifying surprise. 'Are you pulling my leg?' he said. 'Bang on?'

Robinson was satisfied. To Hargreaves' questions he returned discreet, mysterious answers. Their conversation had to some extent relieved the compulsive pressure in his mind, and for the rest of the morning he was able to concentrate on his work.

Sometimes he would go home for lunch but on other occasions he ate at a café. It was a matter which he arranged with his mother before leaving for work in the morning. That morning nothing had been arranged, and it was with an obscure sense that in some way by so doing he was punishing his mother that he went to a café. In order to pay for his meal he had had to borrow a few shillings from Hargreaves.

He had half an hour to kill when he had finished eating. A little sleet had fallen; the sky was darker and the roads and pavements black. He went to the Gresham. He would have liked to have talked to someone, but, apart from the barman, who, after he had served Robinson, sat down with a newspaper, the only other occupant of the room

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was an elderly man leaning against the bar, sipping rum and hot water, and Robinson was too shy to approach him. His fantasies had worn themselves out and he felt bored and empty, as if he had been indulging in some sterile, solitary vice. He found it hard to distinguish between what had been actual and his daydreams; uncertain even whether his conversation with Hargreaves had taken place.

But when he returned to the Town Hall he was convinced that it had.

Hargreaves must have spread his report. The three girls giggling at the foot of the stairs, he knew, were talking of him; indistinguishable words were being spoken in the chief clerk's room—they, too, concerned him; and the assistant solicitor, passing him in the corridor, watched from the remote, cold corner of his eye. He experienced his old sensation of an almost insufferable self-consciousness.

For Robinson the early afternoon, more even than the hours after midnight, was the time of melancholy and Angst when the world's dreariness and his own inadequacy united to create what might have been his hell: the sense of an eternal futility, without hope of relief. Hargreaves was attending a committee meeting, and, alone in the room, Robinson did nothing at all save twist his hands together, press them against his face, and succumb to the stresses that drove his disordered thoughts. It was an experience so intense that his mind became temporarily unbalanced, his appreciation of material, quotidian considerations so weakened that he might have been capable of almost any outrageous act of aberration.

All that he did, however, was to put on his coat and hat, and, without a word to any of his colleagues or superiors, leave the office an hour or more before he was due to finish. The snow had begun, to increase the unfamiliarity of the world. Children just released from school were calling gaily, trying to scrape up the flakes, even as

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they fell, to make snowballs. On the roots and the higher branches of the bare trees there was already a coating of white. The cars' windscreen wipers were all working and everywhere was the sound of dripping water.

He walked fast, head down, like a man with a purpose, but he had no aim at all. Movement did something to calm the pulses dancing in his head. Once his thoughts led him to recall a girl whom he had known some years previously; it seemed to him in one overwhelming revelation that were he to meet her all his problems would be instantaneously solved, and he put his hand in his pocket to find the coppers with which to telephone to her; but before he reached the next kiosk he had forgotten her..

When he came to the corner at which he habitually caught his bus home, he stopped, and without thought boarded the first bus to arrive.

He had forgotten his argument with his mother. She was sitting on a cushion close to the fire, her back against the settee, and she looked up at him expectantly as he entered the dining-room, but when he only murmured 'hullo' she did not answer. He said 'hullo' again as he wandered aimlessly into the room, and as his mother looked away pointedly he remembered.

He said, 'All right, then, sulk,' and went out, slamming the door.

In his bedroom he again gave way to his fantasy of grievance, relishing his mother's anguish. He padded about the room, muttering. Once he opened the door and from the landing called down, 'If you're waiting for me to apologize, I'm not going to. Don't be so childish.' He paused for an answer, but none came.

He went back into the room and threw himself on the bed, but soon arose and began again, like a hungry animal, to pace the carpet.

He went out to the landing once more and shouted, 'I'm getting out of this house. Do you hear? I've had enough. I'm getting out of this house. I'm leaving.'

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Again in his room, as if obeying an order conveyed by his own words, he pulled the suitcase out from beneath his bed and began to heap his clothes into it indiscriminately.

He heard without emotion his father enter the house, but it was with a welcoming jubilation that shortly afterwards he recognized his footsteps on the stairs. When the bedroom door opened he did not look round but remained bending over his suitcase.

His father said, 'Look here, Martin, what's this nonsense?'

When he straightened and turned he saw that his father, wearing the air of authority ineffectually, was uneasy.

Robinson said quietly, with insolence in his calm, 'I've decided to leave, Dad.'

'Leave!' his father said. 'What are you talking about?'

'I'm leaving home. I'm going to live on my own,' Robinson said, as if explaining to a dull child.

'What nonsense is this?' his father said petulantly. 'I come home and your mother tells me you've been behaving like—like—that you've been rude to her, and . . . What is all this nonsense? If it's a woman . . .'

Robinson laughed. 'No, it isn't a woman,' he said. 'I'm just leaving, that's all.'

His father raised his voice and blustered. 'I will not have this damned nonsense. You've upset your mother just because you've some silly trick in your head, and I come home and I find . . .'

Robinson said, 'I don't think there's anything more we can usefully say to each other,' and turned back to the suitcase.

'You cheeky young puppy,' his father said. 'I've a damned good mind to throw you out, or . . .'

Robinson heard the door slam behind him.

He finished his packing with unnatural calmness, washed, changed his suit and went downstairs. In the hall he paused, wondering whether to put his head into the

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dining-room to make some sort of farewell, but could think of nothing to say, so laid his key on the hallstand and went out, closing the door gently, but not so gently as to appear furtive. It was still snowing slightly, but now there was frost in the air and the world had a magical whiteness. Under the street lamps the snow glistened like sugar.

AFTER he had eaten his meal in the evening Carr went to his room; for a while he lay open-eyed on the bed in the dark. Later he rose, went out, and in the nearest pub drank three pints of beer quickly, without conversation. He returned to his lodgings, went directly up to his room, took out paper, and began to write:

My dear Yvonne,

It's snowing here this evening, and—pardon, please, the sentimentality—ever since it began I have been remembering our winter at Darlington. Odd, but perhaps symbolic or something, that a town like Darlington should be the setting for one's romantic memories! I can almost feel the cold of that hard, war-wracked winter, but it is one night in particular that obsesses me, that I can experience again with all my senses. I don't even remember whether it was before or after we were married, but it could only have been a month one way or the other. Do you remember, too, Yvonne? I hope you do. Somehow, I feel that if you don't, too much responsibility rests upon me; if, as time and alcohol do their work, I also come to forget, it will be as if that night never existed. It lives only in our minds—it must live in yours too—and we are its custodians. Yvonne, you must remember.

For days it had been snowing off and on, but mixed with rain and sleet. The camp was simply a sea of mud; everywhere it was raw and wet. The town was black, hideous, cold, cheerless. That day early the snow began to fall more heavily and suddenly it started to freeze; within an hour everything was transformed. Where all had been ugly it became quite beautiful.

In the evening I walked back from the camp. It was dark but there was a brilliant moon. As I crunched through the snow and the moonlight I felt wildly exhilarated and happy. I sang all the bawdy soldiers' songs I had learned at the top of my voice—I

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except, of course, for the anatomical words. Wild extravagance: I went into the pub at the top of the hill just before entering the town and had a double brandy.

It could not, I suppose, have been as beautiful in the town; the traffic must have churned up the snow but I don't remember that. All I can remember is how the roofs glittered in the moonlight—a little corny, that! I never told you this, but I hesitated before I went into the hotel. I imagined somehow that if you had not responded also I should have felt a disappointment quite out of proportion to its cause. I should have had more faith in that wonderfully sympathetic instinct of yours. Do you remember, Yvonne? I climbed the stairs and opened the door. From somewhere you had acquired a couple of candles. You had laid a drawer on its side to make a table—the cloth, Persil-white, was one of our sheets, I suppose. Plates, cutlery, food and a couple of bottles of chianti. You had lit the candles and they softened the moonlight which, reflected from the white roofs, shone directly through the window, and you wore a very severe black dress.

It was hard to realize that it was still just a dingy little hotel room. There was a serenity about it that reminded me of those Dutch paintings of interiors. Throughout the meal a mischievous, irresponsible gaiety was bubbling just below the surface—the chianti helping, doubtless. Afterwards we scraped some snow off the window-sill and dropped snowballs on passers-by. I think we had only one direct hit. I remember a man looking up—he wasn't very pleased—and you shouted obscenities at him in French. We danced together around the room, finally, inevitably, falling on the bed. Afterwards we lay in the moonlight. It was like a kind of mystical experience, impossible to describe, as if—only clichés get anywhere near it—one were listening to the music of the spheres. I don't know how long we lay there. Never again in my life, I know, shall I capture that sensation of intense, revelationary beauty. 'He sang aloud in the dark and touched the heart of the world.'

It must have been nearly midnight when we went out, for the streets were practically deserted. I remember sliding down a

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children's slide with our arms round each other. There was a Geordie copper in it somewhere, too. I think he thought we were drunks or spies, but you flirted him out of it. We went back when it started to snow again and the whole of that night, I think, we slept in each other's arms.

And now it's snowing here. I wonder whether it is in London. I've just read through what I've written—have I merely been romanticizing it all? Was it ever really like that? Yes, damn it, I'm sure it was. I know, of course, that it wasn't all the time—perhaps that was the trouble. Did we expect too much, so that when we bored, irritated each other, instead of being sensible and recognizing that there is always a dark side to the moon, we became reproachful (in our different ways) and bitter?

Why did we fail? I have asked myself that question constantly since, and mostly my answers, since the first few months of hard-boiled insouciance, have been self-condemning.

Ivonne, is there any possibility of our trying again? The leopard has not changed his spots, but at least he now knows they exist. You know that I have never played for your pity, but now I realize that I do need you. I am making something very unpleasant of my life, so I tender a purely selfish appeal to you—or is it perhaps not entirely selfish? Derek.

Carr read through the letter and added as a postscript: *Divorce is so bourgeois these days, anyway.*

Then he put the letter in an envelope, sealed, stamped and addressed it, went out and posted it.

ROBINSON had taken a room in a small boarding-house near the station. The room, blistered, patched, had that shabby angularity of the unloved, deserted, so that its ugliness was not simply an absence of elegance and order, but a positive oppressive reproach. A sense of manly independence sustained him during that first evening, but in the morning when he awoke he felt the loneliness of an outcast, an object—like the room—existing on sufferance.

Each time he answered the telephone in his office during the morning he expected to hear his mother's voice; he had made no decision as to his response to any overture to reconciliation, but when the anticipated call did not come he was left with a sense of destitution. Before they left for lunch he asked Hargreaves for another loan but his colleague said he was unable to accommodate him, and reminded him, with a shy uncasiness, of the money that he already owed him.

There was no telephone call for him during the afternoon either.

His companions for the evening meal at the boarding house were a derelict musician, who, as he told Robinson, was at the time unemployed, and an elderly woman, exophthalmic, who did not speak, but whose lips moved constantly as if she were confessing to a deaf god.

It was snowing heavily when he went out; a cold wind drove the flakes, and drifts were forming at the street corners and in the entries. Beneath his feet it was as heavy as sand. Every so often he would stop walking and shake himself like an animal but the snow soon covered his coat again.

It was in an attempt to find human contact that he entered the first pub that he came to. He wanted to talk,

to make the gestures that would re-establish his place within the community of the living, but the cold bar was deserted, and after serving him the landlady returned into some inner room among her own kind. Afterwards he went into a small café, and that was empty too. When the waitress came to him he made desperate attempts to keep her talking; at first he said something that amused her and she laughed; but he went on with that febrile insistence of those whose listeners have always somewhere else to go, and she too had somewhere else to go, and, alarmed, went there.

Even in the Gresham there were few customers. Among those at the bar there was no-one whom Robinson knew, but when he turned after being served with his beer, he saw at a table beneath the band the Jew, Hyams. He was with two women, elderly, who might equally have been charwomen or procuresses. It was the only table in the room from which laughter arose, and Robinson watched them with a bitter envy. Hyams was obviously telling dirty stories: the hush, heads bent into an invisible centre, and then the climax, the women crowing grotesquely, rocking backwards and forwards, and the Jew's grin a little wider. His supply of stories seemed unlimited. Once he left the table to visit the toilet. As he came near to Robinson the boy prepared to greet him, but Hyams kept his eyes away from him, and when he returned the Jew joined the women again.

Robinson struck up a conversation with a nondescript elderly man at the bar. They talked of the snow.

'We don't get the weather that we used to,' the man said. 'It's like everything else, being levelled out. All these country houses, and the Duke and his missis at the door taking a bob a nob. History. No real summers, no real winters. Do you know there was a time when the Thames used to freeze up? Not once, every year. They used to build bloody great bonfires on it. Samuel Pepys describes it—you know Samuel Pepys?'

They each bought a round of drinks. And still from that one table the laughter that jangled somewhere within Robinson's head, reminding him of a chance that had once but for ever been missed.

'I remember as a kid,' the man said. 'Snowed every day for a month. Drifts, you haven't seen anything, call these drifts. Twenty feet, thirty feet deep. If you went off the road you'd bloody had it, and I'm telling you the bloody truth.'

Later—and now he was listening for the laughter, as one listens for the gate that bangs unremittingly through the sleepless night: 'And the gin tuppence a nip, too. I was telling you snowed it had and all and there we were, well if we'd had one we'd had twenty, and they were nips, too, not like these bloody tarts dribbles today, and when we got out Jim couldn't bloody well walk, deep, it was deep as a bloody skyscraper, and straight in it. Jim, I said, laugh, laughing like a bloody ninny, Jim, I said, we're in the bloody clouds. And could I stop laughing, and he said . . .'

But the laughing had stopped; someone had got up cursing from a warm bed, put on boots, a coat, and had shut that repetitious gate.

'How's the criminal world, old boy?'

Robinson turned slowly, not hoping for too much. He saw that the Jew was drunk; his eyes were inflamed and his skin was moist. His face was set in an ingratiating grin, that yet was also hostile.

'How are our friends the D's?' Hyams said. 'Still barking up a gum tree? They make me laugh. I bet you laugh too, don't you?'

Robinson had recognized him immediately as an enemy, but he welcomed him gladly. To be the object of enmity can be as exciting as being loved; both are a substantiation of one's individuality. He looked at the red network of veins around the bridge of Hyams' nose, and said blithely, 'Are you still here?'

'Still here, old man? I'll be here till closing time.'

But he had understood him, Robinson realized. 'I mean still here, here in town.'

'I don't get it.'

'I thought you'd have cleared out,' Robinson said. 'Gone abroad, to France or somewhere, to Palestine.'

'Why should I clear out?' Hyams said, emphasizing the word 'I'.

'With the police showing such an interest in you I should have thought you'd have wanted to get away.'

Hyams laughed loudly as if Robinson had told him another joke that he could add to his repertoire. 'That's good,' he said, 'that's very good.'

'When he had finished laughing he said, 'Aren't you going to buy me a drink?'

'Oh, sorry,' Robinson said politely. 'What are you having?'

'I was only joking, old man,' the Jew said rapidly. 'This is on me. What are you drinking?'

'Oh, no, it's my round.'

'I expect I can afford it better than you,' Hyams said. 'You never find a Jew-boy broke, do you? Besides you may need it, you never know, do you?'

The Jew bought the drinks. 'Talking of the police,' he said, 'do you know the one about the copper who found a couple on the job in the street, so he ran them in?'

Before Hyams had finished laughing he had said, 'Do you know they've found her husband? He was at sea. They know it wasn't him.'

'Yes, I know,' Robinson lied pointlessly, elaborating with even greater inconsequence, 'a chap on the *Post* told me.'

'You mean Carr?' the Jew said. 'You're a great pal of his these days, aren't you? Where does he come in?'

Since they had been standing together at the bar three of four men had greeted Hyams with friendliness—a sign of his popularity, his ubiquitous familiarity that angered

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Robinson. 'They asked me a hell of a lot about you the last time they saw me,' he said wildly.

'Did they?' Hyams said. 'Local boy makes good. And I suppose you told them—a no-good bloody Jew, a waster, a . . .'

'I told them all I knew,' Robinson said with a deliberate air of mystery.

'About me, you mean?' Hyams said. 'But not everything, surely. I mean everything about everything about everything. Having another?'

'It's mine this time,' Robinson said.

'No, no, old boy. It's quite all right. I really like buying them. People always expect a Jew-boy to be mean and I like surprising them.'

Robinson allowed Hyams to pay and then regretted it. He realized as he took his glass that with his pieces of silver the Jew had bought, not only two bottles of beer, but a moral ascendancy; by drinkers' etiquette Hyams was now entitled to the next point.

'Got any new girl friend yet?' Hyams said pleasantly, lowering his glass. 'What about that bit I saw you in here with once, just after Jean had it? I haven't seen her about lately.'

Robinson felt himself colouring and in his confusion blurted out stupidly, 'That's got nothing to do with you. You leave her out of it.'

Hyams laughed. 'Come off it, mate,' he said. It was the time for him to press home his advantage. He repeated in a inockery of nobility, 'You leave her out of it,' and laughed again.

'She's nothing to do with you,' Robinson said, control almost gone, or in unconscious appreciation that anger is the most effective mask for embarrassment. 'Yes, you leave her out of it.'

'You're a fine one to be so bloody chivalrous,' Hyams said, not laughing now.

'Only a lout—or a Jew, a yid . . .'

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'You oughtn't to drink so much beer,' Hyams said. 'It doesn't agree with you. Jean said you were queer. She told me all about you . . .'

He stopped speaking, and it was as if neither of them had any more to say.

Hyams emptied his glass and again his face broke into a wide smile. He put his hand on Robinson's shoulder. 'You don't want to mind me,' he said. 'I'm drunk.' And then he walked away.

It occurred to Robinson that he may have been talking to a murderer; but what was that to him? His adolescent egotism rendered him incurious, and that sense of unreality which he had experienced now for two days blunted all his perceptions, demolished values. It was like a dye that stained and impregnated to its own colour all with which it came into contact. A murderer! When one enters unfamiliar territory all customs and sights are strange, so that the ordinary and the abnormal become indistinguishable; the labourer or the clerk are as remarkable as the poet, the saint . . . or the murderer. He could no longer make normal judgements or experience the natural responses to events.

As he stood drinking against the bar his argument with Hyams assumed a dreamlike remoteness, and it was also as if in a dream—in which all may be expected and there are no limitations to coincidence—that, turning, he recognized the man seated alone as the stranger who had struck him in the dark. This enemy did not laugh, nor did he look away immediately as Robinson caught his eye, and the boy almost made a friendly gesture of recognition. The stranger's face was saturnine, taut, like a gypsy's.

Each, between sipping from their glasses, would glance casually at the other, and Robinson waited placidly for what was to happen. But when the gypsy had emptied his glass, he stood up and walked out. Robinson followed him as soon as he decently could, half-expecting, half-hoping that the gypsy would be awaiting him outside the hotel.

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He was not there, however, but as Robinson walked back through the cold and empty streets to his lodgings, the hope that the gypsy would accost him persisted; yet the boy walked without fear. When he reached his lodgings he turned and stood for a moment, but the white street was void.

There was no warmth in the house and Robinson's room seemed even colder than the street. He had no shilling for the gas-fire. As he went to draw the curtains he looked out for a moment on to the unfamiliar snow-covered roofs. Vivid flashes, that crackled like fireworks, illuminated a nearby factory as an electric train drew into the station.

He undressed shivering and went to bed without washing or brushing his teeth—another step from the path of custom!

JUST above the roofs of the houses opposite the police station was a sickly, moon-like sun. The east wind had blown away most of the clouds and the snow had stopped. Alone in the waiting room, Carr stood pressed against the radiator, over which he ran his hands without satisfaction. He stared blankly into the street. Vehicles had churned the snow in the roadway into a grey slush, but everywhere else it remained hard and dry. There were few pedestrians and everything seemed frozen still. The trees were bare, like bundles of sticks, and there was nothing for the wind to move.

Carr wandered away from the window and picked up the two library books he had dropped on the table; they were a volume of poems by Clough and the translation of a novel by Alberto Moravia. He turned over the pages of the novel in batches, running them between his fingers like playing cards, letting his eye pass along a line or two of print before dropping more pages. One passage arrested his eyes' too hasty movement:

At his birth he had not, in reality, begun to live, but rather to dream fearful and absurd dreams. Yes, it was essential for him to die, he thought, to take advantage of the nightmare's greatest intensity to cry out once and then awake.

Carr's mouth twisted upwards in an expression that might have indicated self-derision, then he slammed the book shut and dropped it back on the table. He returned to the radiator and the window. A taxi had drawn up outside and an elderly woman dressed in black was being assisted up the steps of the Court building by a younger man who had his arm around her. A light was suddenly switched on in the bedroom of a house opposite to distract Carr's gaze, but no-one appeared in the room.

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The journalist, etiolated by boredom, scraped some paint from the window-sill with his finger-nail, and said aloud, 'To cry out once and then awake.'

He had worked hard throughout the morning and had planned to go to a cinema that afternoon. He used the cinema as some men use Turkish baths—for titillation of a jaded spirit, a place in which one could relax luxuriously and with complete irresponsibility, without thought. When he had been instructed to report the inquest he had felt as a drug addict might when, going to keep the rendezvous with his supplier, he sees him walk away between two tall men in raincoats and felt hats.

All thought was wintry and barren. A car drew up and a solicitor in pin-stripe trousers mounted the steps. Carr yawned noisily three times in succession.

The lights were on in the Court room. Apart from the Coroner, his clerk and two police officers there were only the four witnesses present.

It was a case of no importance: an elderly man, retired, found with his head in the gas-oven. The coroner read the depositions without expression and asked the witnesses a few perfunctory questions with politeness and solicitude. All were tacitly conspiring to preserve the dead man's honour by testifying to his insanity. Carr yawned even as he made his notes.

The widow—the woman whom Carr had seen being helped up the steps—was the last witness.

'Had he ever said anything about taking his own life?' the Coroner asked.

'No, never.'

'Had he seemed depressed lately?'

'Yes, it was sort of that he'd been queer. He wasn't the same since he finished working. It was like he was kind of lost. There'd be times when he didn't seem to recognize anyone. It was like as if the break was too much for him. He wasn't normal, sir, never since. He wasn't the same. It got worse; he just wouldn't respond. He wasn't human;

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he lived in a world of his own, it seemed, where things were only happening inside his head like, and what was really happening in the world didn't count any more.'

'But he'd never threatened to take his own life.'

'No, he'd never said anything.'

'But you felt that he was behaving strangely?'

'That's right, sir.'

'I am satisfied,' the Coroner said, 'that this man died as a result of inhalation of coal gas causing asphyxia and that he took his own life. I am also satisfied that at the time he did so the balance of his mind was disturbed and I shall record a verdict accordingly. I would like to express my sympathy with the widow and other relatives.'

In the hall outside the Court room Carr saw the Coroner, whom he knew as an acquaintance. 'Tell me,' said the journalist, 'how do you decide, I mean where is the dividing line between sanity and balance of mind disturbed?'

'It's usually clear enough,' said the Coroner, 'like this one today.'

'And this fellow was insane?'

'I wouldn't go as far as to say that, but definitely sufficiently mental to justify a balance of mind verdict. It was a typical case—lack of contact with reality, non-recognition . . .'

'Yes. Things were only happening inside his head like.'

'That's right,' the Coroner said.

'But surely it is all a matter of degree,' said Carr, his forehead wrinkled in perplexity. He made a gesture with his hands, something like a shrug. 'After all, we all only know our own impressions of events, as it were. Everything's in the mind, in a sense.'

The Coroner chuckled. 'I'm not getting involved in any argument on metaphysics,' he said. 'We have to work by a common sense, rule of thumb method. I agree the dividing line is arbitrary. The law has to judge by the

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standards and experiences of the majority. If you like, I'll grant that this fellow might have been sane and we're all mad. Perhaps it's when you become sane enough you take your own life.'

'Perhaps that's how it must seem to them,' Carr said seriously. 'To be a human being is not always so easy.'

'After all, there's not much to live for these days, one way and another,' said the Coroner.

'You're bloody right,' Carr said.

It was raw in the street so that the atmosphere even was like something solid against which he bruised himself when making any movement. As Carr, hands deep in his overcoat pockets, scarf wrapped high around his neck, trudged back to his office, he saw Robinson walking along the pavement towards him. He, too, was huddled against the cold but his head was held high, yet although Carr halted to greet him the boy walked past unseeing, his eyes turned perhaps on to a world of his own, in which things were only happening inside his head—like.

Back among the typewriters and the balls of copy paper, Carr told his news editor: 'Nothing in it, head in gas-oven, postman, third of a column.'

Robinson had, in fact, been on his way to meet Alice. That morning he had woken full of heart, clear-headed, militant. He was battling courageously against heavy odds; all men were enemies but he could defeat them, could withstand treachery, hate and the worse cruelty of thoughtless indifference. Was he not free, tied not to place, person or principle, free as the air? During the day occasional clouds passed over his sun, but when he met the girl in the railway refreshment room, as they had arranged, the sky was still clear.

'I've got some news for you,' he said.

'What is it?' the girl said.

'Ah, you'd never guess.'

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'Well, what is it?'

'Guess. Impatient, curious, aren't we?' said Robinson. 'I'll bet you can't guess.'

Eventually he told her. He smiled proudly at her bewilderment.

'I don't understand,' she said, wrinkling her forehead. 'Left home? Why have you left home?'

'They got my back up. I wanted to be independent. On your own you're free. You can do what you like, come and go when you like, and there's no questions.'

'What does your mother think of it?'

'I don't know,' Robinson said impatiently. 'That's the sort of question a girl would ask. That doesn't matter. It's just that now I'm on my own, free.'

'This place you're at—what is it?'

'It's digs,' Robinson said, 'a boarding house. Not so hot, but it'll do until I find somewhere better.'

She was not listening. 'But why? I don't understand.'

'You wouldn't understand.' Her reactions had disappointed him. 'A man wants to be free, his own master.'

'But why at this time?'

'What do you mean at this time?'

'When there's all this trouble and everything.'

'That's got nothing to do with it.'

She had not understood, he thought sadly; her attitude of puzzled concern depreciated the glamour of his adventure; another cloud over his sun. Always she disappointed him.

He shifted his position in his chair, turning a shoulder on her, looked around the room at the businessmen, with their black hats, umbrellas and brief-cases, returned from the nearby city and gulping quick drinks before returning to—he thought—the homes and families in which they were so emphatically not free. Not free either the three porters drinking cups of tea at the other end of the bar, nor the young couple with suitcases at the table next to them . . . or perhaps they were . . .

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The idea came to him suddenly. 'I'll show you after,' he said to the girl. 'You can come back with me and I'll show you the digs.'

The musician had said: 'There's one thing about this place—it smells like hell of cabbage all the time but the old woman doesn't mind if you pick up a bit of stuff and bring her back. It's Liberty Hall, boy. I think she likes it; she gets in the room underneath and listens to the bed creaking.'

The girl said, 'I don't know. I don't think I want to.'

As always her opposition encouraged him in his project. 'Why not? I want you to, please, Alice.' He slipped easily into the brand of pathos that he knew from experience was the most effective: 'Somehow—no-one has ever seen it, the room—it will make it less lonely if someone who's fond of me can see where I'm living.' The spurious solemnity thickened his voice. 'I feel funny about it. It's silly, perhaps, but it'll make it seem more like home once you've been there. Besides, you wanted to know what the place was like.'

He leaned forward and looked at her appealingly. An imp was chuckling somewhere in his head for the very simplicity of it. A lock of hair had fallen over his dark, womanish eyes, and as his lips moved all the skin of his face trembled to give an impression of vivacity.

The girl said slowly, 'Do you know what you are doing?'

'What?'

'What you are doing?'

'I don't understand.'

'It doesn't matter then,' the girl said.

There was a brief silence.

'You don't want another coffee, do you?' Robinson said.

'I don't mind.'

He said: 'Drink up, and we'll move. I've got to show you my room.'

The girl's eyes were troubled. 'I don't want to very much, Martin.'

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'You promised. You said you would. You promised. I should have thought you'd have wanted to see where I live.'

The girl emptied her cup and picked up her handbag.

Sitting on the bed, Robinson watched her with amusement as she took in the room. He thought of a cat as it enters an unfamiliar place, how it appears to tread with uplifted skirts, to sniff the air, to smell out danger.

There was a rim of dirt around the basin on the washstand; a dead insect floated on top of the water in the jug. The mirror was spotted with black and yellow fungus-like marks. Torn and dirty the carpet and also the grey lace curtains. Above the head of the bed hung a gaudy religious lithograph.

'A charming view you've got, all those pretty chimneys,' the girl said with an effort at lightness, her back towards him.

'I'll light the gas fire and you can take off your coat.'

He put a coin in the meter and lit the fire. The girl was still looking out of the window. He walked across to her, and she let him take the coat from her shoulders. She did not turn round.

'I'll draw the curtains,' Robinson said.

When he had done that she could no longer look out of the window and had to turn. But she would not look at him. He sat on the bed and took off his shoes, putting on a pair of slippers. Robinson was enjoying the uneasiness of the girl, who was walking jerkily about the room, picking up pieces of clothing, straightening objects he had thrown down carelessly.

'I see you've brought your old sports jacket with you.'

He only grunted in acknowledgement, watching her and finding her not very desirable.

'This isn't the place to keep your shoe brushes.'

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'I'm sorry I've only that chair,' Robinson said, as she folded a pair of trousers he had thrown across a straight-backed wooden chair. 'You'll have to sit on the bed.'

He was quite at home—he undid his collar and loosened his tie—but wondered whether he was bored. The few moments of partial domesticity he had enjoyed with the other woman had not been like this. Then he had been the pupil; now he had graduated and was the teacher.

'The fire gives out quite a good heat, doesn't it?'

She stopped pacing suddenly and turned towards him. 'Why did you ask me back here, Martin?'

He shrugged. 'I thought you'd like to see where I lived. Come and sit down.'

She walked towards the bed but remained standing.

Robinson began to speak rapidly: 'Of course, it isn't the place I'd choose to live. I'll look round and find somewhere better later, in a better district, and nicely furnished. But it's got its advantages and it's quite cheap and . . .'

He put out his arms and pulled her towards him. She offered no resistance and he held her, pressing his head against her stomach and talking wildly.

'I'm glad you've come, Alice. I've always wanted, together, and it's different in a place of my own where we can, what we like, and not worry, no interruptions . . .'

He rose to his feet and kissed her. She was quite acquiescent; then he pulled her down on to the bed, lying so that a part of his body held her down.

For a while she lay inert, eyes closed. When she pushed him away it was unviolently, so that, had he not been taken by surprise, he could have maintained his position.

'I can't, I can't,' the girl said, in an anguished voice.

She slid off the bed, leaving one shoe behind.

'No, I can't, Martin, I can't.' She was standing, breathing heavily, her back to the wall as he went up to her, and she struck out with both hands downwards, as one might push down a too-friendly dog.

He was on his knees his face buried in her skirts. 'Alice,

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Alice, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Alice. I don't know, oh, why, why, I'm sorry.'

She put one hand almost absent-mindedly on the top of his head, but soon she pushed him gently from her and walked to the bed to retrieve her shoe. She put on her coat, glanced briefly at her reflection in the blemished mirror, shook her hair back.

He was leaning against the wall near the door as she went out but made no effort to stop her. As she opened the door, he said in a strained, husky voice, 'Don't go, Alice, please, Alice, don't go. Not like this.'

She looked at him as she turned to close the door gently behind her. Her expression was compassionate, but he did not know for whom it was she grieved.

THE business of living has to be got through somehow. Bills have to be paid, engagements kept or broken, and someone's suffering is always observed by some incurious bystander indifferent to all but his personal concerns.

On the occasion of one of their meetings, Robinson expressed something of this to Carr.

'You find it hard to keep your eye on the ball, you mean?' Carr asked. 'Yes,' he went on, without waiting for an answer, 'there is always a person from Porlock. The condemned man eats a hearty breakfast; the lover's belly rumbles. Even kings, mystics, great courtesans or poets cannot leave all of living to their servants.'

The conversation that had given rise to Carr's conceits had followed reflections on the part of Robinson concerning the nature of his daily existence. After he had left home the days had passed, as they had to: he worked, read the newspapers, ate, slept, and if all the complicated contrivances of his existing were now taking place in a world that had subtly altered, the actions themselves followed the old familiar pattern. He had developed a rash on one side of his face and under the jawbone. This was not painful, except when he shaved, but it was unsightly and had a debilitating psychological effect. To it he devoted many of his hours of solitary thought. The more grave problems confronting him he considered much less frequently. It seemed that his mind shied away from them: when he did begin to think of his estrangement from his family, or the ambiguity of his position regarding the dead woman, he would find his hand picking at the skin of his face and that would divert, like a road-block, the outriders of his mind.

Of the girl Alice he did not think at all; she no longer

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had existence within him. It was as if that painful scene in his room had smashed a record on which all she had ever been, done, said, had been engraved. When she had left that night, he had remained leaning against the wall for some minutes, incapable of thought or feeling; then feeling came back and with it self-disgust and humiliation. He had thrown himself on to the bed on which his attempt at seduction had been so rawly defeated and, with his face in the pillow, had wept and called out wild, incoherent words. After a while he had fallen into a brief sleep, compounded of featureless dreams of shapes, sounds, tastes, essences; but his sleep brought no relaxation, for when he awoke he was still trembling and his whole body felt weak and incompetent. He had gone out into the night without motive and had walked aimlessly in a kind of coma; afterwards he had no recollection of where he had been before finding himself on the edge of the sand dunes some distance from the town. He had been near an old stone breakwater that ran out a hundred yards into the sea at full-tide. He had walked out some way along the breakwater; it was a dark night and all that had been visible had been the lights on the end of the pier, a lightship's recurring beacon far out to sea, and the phosphorescent whiteness of the waves as they disintegrated over the parapet at the end.

Afterwards he had returned to the breakwater several times; it was as if there were a part of him that drew sustenance from the salty, battered stone, no longer serving any useful purpose. He came to regard it as a kind of talisman.

He was telling Carr something of this: ' . . . as if it, like, peaceful, yes, that's it, peaceful. I feel all the tension slipping away.'

From time to time the two had been meeting, generally by chance in the Gresham, but the intensity of their relationship had weakened. The reporter was more casual in manner so that his emotional ascendancy over the younger man was diminished.

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And now they fell into an uninterested silence, which Carr broke eventually by asking, 'Where's Alice these days? I haven't seen her lately.'

The question came as a shock to Robinson, the release of the censored memory of that violent rupture exploding in his mind like a magnesium flash. It was only by an immense effort of self-control that, after a pause, he was able to answer, 'Oh, she's around.'

'An evasive answer, if you will forgive me,' said Carr.

'Well, things are a bit strained at the moment between us.'

A sudden quickening, a lightening of the burden of his self-absorption, reminiscent of pleasure, took Carr by surprise, as if he had been a rival lover learning of his opponent's discomfiture.

'Don't tell me, of course,' he said, 'if you'd rather not, but what's the trouble exactly?'

Like a false friend, he thought, the husband's confidant, the viper in his bosom.

'Oh, I don't know. Perhaps we're not suited.'

'Do you not miss her?'

'Sort of. One gets used to having a girl.'

Carr would have wished to pursue the subject, but there was, however, a limit to the degree of bad taste one could permit oneself even with Robinson.

And perhaps it was because one gets used to having a girl that Robinson ultimately attempted to get one.

He could not stay in his room at night. He would visit cinemas or public-houses and then, because he had little money, would prowl the streets aimlessly until visiting a milk-bar, where he would drink a cup of coffee before returning to his morbid room.

One evening he had been walking for some time when he saw a girl strolling slowly on high heels on the opposite side of the road. He quickened his pace and crossed the

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road in front of her to stand in a shop doorway, considering alternative phrases with which to accost her. As she approached, he recognized her as the blonde girl who had been drunk in the club to which Carr had taken him, but he allowed her to pass without speaking. She walked straight by without looking at him, then, without turning her head, stopped to inspect a lighted shop-window further down the street.

After a suitable interval Robinson approached her.

'Hullo, aren't you a member of Wally's?'

'Hullo,' the girl said, as surprised as the aunt playing hide-and-seek who finds her favourite niece concealed beneath the bed from which her leg had been protruding.

'I thought I'd seen you there.'

'Are you a member?'

'I go up a few times with a friend.'

'Do you?' She was still looking in the window, but now with a kind of lingering last farewell glance, as if she might any moment up anchor and away, waiting only for a last passenger, who might or might not come aboard before the tide changed.

'Would you care to come for a drink?' Robinson said.

The passenger, loaded with baggage, had appeared at the head of the gangway and the order to cast off was delayed. 'Well, I might,' the girl said.

She led him into the cocktail bar of the Metropole and requested whisky. Until he had returned from the bar with their third round she maintained a ladylike reserve; after that she was more friendly, tucking her arm through his and dropping sexual insinuations into their conversation, like that same aunt dropping bon-bons into the mouth of that same favourite niece.

A man of the world expects services for payment rendered. 'Where do you live?' Robinson said.

'Round near the fire station. Why do you want to know?'

'A flat?'

'Yes, I've got a nice little flat.'

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'On your own.'

'As snug as a bug in a rug. It's a nice little flat and it's got a lovely bedroom and a lovely big soft bed.'

The word bed was clearly a cue. Robinson squeezed the girl's leg.

'I'm all on my ownic-oh,' she said. 'But sometimes I ask a friend back if I like them.'

'Do you like me?'

'I think you're a very nice boy.'

It was after he had bought another round of drinks that the three men came into the bar. They were large men, with red faces, and exhibited a brash confidence, reminiscent of a boxer's as he enters the ring, so that one might have expected them to link their hands above their heads and execute a little step-dance. They greeted the girl with Robinson as they entered and she smiled politely.

After a while one of the men, who wore a camel-hair coat, came over to the settee where Robinson and the girl were sitting. Ignoring the boy, he began to talk to the girl. His conversation was innocuous and she responded without visible enthusiasm. Robinson looked away, feeling for the first time a faint, sad stirring of desire. Later the man returned to his companions.

At closing time the lights were dimmed. Robinson went out to the toilet, persuading himself that he was pleased with life. As he returned he passed the three men standing by the door leading to the street. The girl was not on the settee and he experienced a brief anticipation of betrayal, but almost immediately she emerged from the women's toilet, came up to him and put her hand on his arm.

'I'm sorry, dear,' she said, with an infinity of remoteness in her voice. 'My friends have asked me to a party. I'll have to go. You don't mind, do you?'

'You're going?' Robinson said stupidly.

'I asked if I could bring you, dear, but they're jealous. It's been a lovely evening. Thank you very much. Kiss me good night.' She held up her dry mouth.

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'You're not going,' Robinson said, and he caught hold of her arm.

'Don't do that,' the girl said sharply; and the man in the camel-hair coat came up.

'Having trouble, Myrtle?' he said.

Robinson swore at him.

'That to me!' the man said.

'I tell you you're not going,' Robinson shouted at the girl.

'I think you'd better go home, son,' the man said. His two companions were coming towards them. 'You'll be getting into trouble.'

'Nasty drunken little twerp,' one of the other men said. 'I don't know where you find them, Myrtle. Come on, let's get going.'

The girl dragged her arm free and walked out with the three men, ignoring Robinson.

'Definitely a cochon,' the man in the camel-hair coat said.

Robinson stood for a moment dumbly; his face was red with anger and his hands were sweating. Then he followed them out. The girl said something to her companions as they stepped into a car and they all looked back at him and laughed. As the car moved off the driver swung round the wheel so that Robinson had to step back, and they laughed again.

The expense of that evening of pleasure had upset Robinson's financial schedule. The following morning he asked Hargreaves, 'I wonder, I suppose, could you possibly lend me ten bob, Peter?'

Hargreaves looked down at the blotting-pad on his desk. 'Well, chum,' he said, 'it's a bit sticky at the moment. You know you still owe me a bit, you know.'

'I hadn't forgotten,' Robinson said.

He made his lunch of a bowl of soup and a roll in a milk-

bar. Because it was raining he returned early to the office, with the intention of writing a letter; but then the effort of putting pen to paper, of assembling sufficient of the bits and pieces of his thoughts, seemed too much for him. He began to fill in a crossword puzzle in his newspaper but after entering a few words, abandoned it.

There was a sudden break in the clouds outside and a ray of sunshine fell across his desk like a sword. For a little while he sat quite still; then, seeking distraction from the desert of his thoughts, he went through the contents of the drawers of his desk, but could find nothing with which he was not too familiar. Through the door came the voices of two men passing along the corridor and when all was quiet again the room somehow seemed more narrowly confined. When he went over to Hargreaves' desk boredom was his initial motive; it was, however, a measure of his demoralization that he opened the drawers without scruple. The first contained sundry papers, letters; he glanced at those on the surface, as one might sample a library book, but was insufficiently interested to proceed further. The contents of the second drawer revealed the point in Hargreaves' existence at which he had become static: it was littered with mementoes of his service life—cap badges, buttons, papers, a German cigarette case, an Italian pen-knife. The revolver and the box of cartridges were at the back of the drawer but unconcealed, except that an old forage cap, greasy and torn, lay partially over them. Robinson was not interested. He read Hargreaves' demobilization papers and then went back to his own desk.

The sword of sunlight had been sheathed. So grey was the light, as if it had been filtered through sacking, that the room seemed almost monochromatic. Robinson rose, stepped over to Hargreaves' desk, opened the drawer and took the revolver and cartridges, putting them into his pocket without examining them.

His theft gave him a small furtive glow, created perhaps

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by its very lack of motive. He could have given no explanation: the revolver was the only item of value in the drawers, but he had no thought of making profit from it, still less of making use of it.

From time to time during the afternoon he fingered it in his pocket, and its touch each time gave a kind of stimulus to his imagination, a quickening of the blood.

In the succeeding days whenever he thought of his possession of the revolver he experienced a similar resurgence; the weapon acquired a symbolic value, giving a point, a nexus to his disintegrating purposes.

‘ARE you sure it’ll be all right me coming?’ Robinson said. It was the third time, Carr observed, that he had asked the same question in much the same words. ‘I don’t want to gatecrash, you know.’

‘Of course, it’ll be all right,’ Carr said. ‘She said they’d be short of men.’

‘But I haven’t any bottles.’

‘It’s not a bottle party. Eunice is superior to such bohemian affairs and, fortunately, too prosperous to have to resort to them. These are just a token. You can carry one if it’ll make you feel better.’

There was a shiftiness of insincerity about Robinson’s repeated requests for assurance that Carr found distasteful. As the taxi stopped at a traffic light he caught a glimpse of Robinson’s face, the rash livid in the red glow, and felt for him at that moment a sudden positive dislike which instantly seemed a disloyalty. It was, he thought as the taxi started again, like falling out of love, when the loved one seems all the less to be admired because of the over-valuation one had accorded previously; one’s own taste is shown to have been at fault and so one’s vanity is wounded, which, in turn . . . and so on.

‘I think you’ll enjoy it,’ Carr said in compensatory kindness. ‘There’ll be a fair amount of liquor. Eunice is a good soul and you might find a girl to your taste. Besides it’ll take your mind off things a bit.’

Why had he brought Robinson? he wondered. Without having made any conscious decision he had latterly been avoiding the boy. Had he felt guilty—as one surrenders to a voluptuous sense of guilt recalling the woman, sitting alone with a magazine, the loved one, whom one has abandoned? So that when Eunice had invited him to the party, saying, ‘Of course, there’s this man shortage,

something to do with the war, or emigration or something, can you do anything about it?' he had been compelled consciously to consider the pitied, abandoned one and to make atonement.

Robinson had accepted the invitation with enthusiasm, but since they had met that evening he had appeared on edge, drinking quickly, as if, while wanting to attend the party, he was also frightened of it.

'Will I know anyone there? What sort of people will they be?'

Carr paid the taxi-driver, led the way up the trim suburban path. The outer door was open, the windows all lit and the luxurious effluence of expensive recorded music filtered through.

As their hostess opened the inner door, the dance music became suddenly louder and with it the laughter, rapid words, the sounds of human pleasure. She was a plump, pleasant-faced woman, with untidy fair hair. She greeted them with what appeared genuine warmth.

'How nice,' the woman said to Robinson after Carr had introduced them. 'I'm so glad you weren't killed in the war. Nothing personal, of course, but it does make for a shortage of men at parties. That's why I'm all for the women's services.'

As they entered the room Carr felt a touch of foreboding. The party was smaller than he had expected and conversation was still general. The guests were at the stage when they wore a common cloak against the latecomer; this, coupled with their general surface air of assurance, their relative prosperity, would, Carr felt, draw forth all Robinson's gaucherie.

Robinson was by some years the youngest man there. When his hostess introduced him he took a step forward as if not knowing whether to shake hands all round, and then stood vaguely in the centre of the room, bowing his head slightly, with the forced smile on his mouth belied by his frowning forehead.

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To distract attention from him Carr indulged in a little mild buffoonery, kissing the hands of the women whom he knew with exaggerated gallantry and addressing the men in terms of Edwardian courtesy. What idiot's folly am I permitting myself now? he thought.

'Sit yourselves down near the bar,' Eunice said brightly, indicating a table on which the bottles were standing.

'No, we'll sit with my lady Helen,' Carr said, despising himself.

She was sitting by herself on a settee; a tall, fair girl, she possessed a dominating air of composure which gave her distinction in that room where restlessness fluttered like a flock of frightened birds.

'Helen, thy beauty is to me as those . . . We haven't seen each other for ages, have we, ducks?'

She was the youngest woman in the room and he took Robinson to her as to a refuge. Although both her features and her body were well-proportioned she created an impression of sexlessness that was strengthened by an almost total absence of make-up and lack of dress sense that verged on the grotesque. She was the wife of a naval officer whom she had married when she was seventeen and to whom she was exclusively devoted. That, however, did not prevent her from taking a comradely yet feminine interest in other men and she and Carr were friends of long standing.

He introduced Robinson to her. Drinks were brought. Carr and the girl chatted in that style of intimate banter that serves as a substitute for affectionate avowals. More drinks were brought. Robinson would make an almost convulsive entry into the conversation and then would relapse into a sullen silence. The party meanwhile was improving, the temperature rising as the level of the bottles declined. More guests arrived and when one of the newcomers sat by the side of Robinson the boy turned to her as if in resentment.

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'Who is he?' Helen asked Carr, with a suggestion of criticism in her voice.

There is such a thing as masculine loyalty. 'He's not a bad lad, really. He's in a bit of trouble at the moment. I'll tell you some time. Perhaps he's even a fit subject for a little of your sistering.'

The girl smiled. 'As with you, my dear. In fact, I'm not tartish enough for him.'

'Oh, you're too modest, ducks.'

'You don't find me tartish, do you? You like me for my sweet disposition?'

'Only God—and possibly your unappreciative husband—can love you for yourself alone and not your yellow hair.'

'Now you like me, Derek. I've given you a chance to introduce a quotation. Wasn't it tactful of me?'

'I give you no credit. I have one for every topic, Just part of the cultural service.'

More drinks. It was pleasant, he thought, very pleasant to talk to Helen airily, lightly, like this: with a glass in his hand. Only somewhere in his head there was a nagging whisper reminding him of something that ought to be done, as if he were a watchman or a sentry who had deserted, or temporarily quitted, his post. Drinks again.

The radiogram was turned up louder. 'Wouldn't some of you like to dance?' Eunice called out from the centre of the room.

Helen looked enquiringly at Carr.

'With my sister!' the reporter said. 'Ask Martin.'

While she and Robinson were shuffling, along with three or four other couples, around the ante-room Carr went to the table on which the bottles stood. There he became involved in a conversation concerning the mixing of cocktails. Away from Helen he was enjoying the party less. The empty exchange of words, words without the backing of thought or the inflatus of passion, witless, imprecise, meaningless words, suddenly appalled him.

He asked one of the women in the group with whom he

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was talking to dance. After a couple of rounds of the ante-room he swept her out into the hall where he administered a single kiss.

She said, 'Mr. Carr, in the light, too!'

Later he danced once with Helen. 'Enjoying yourself?' she asked.

'The drink is very good,' he replied.

Later still he looked for her again but could not find her. The woman he had danced with previously was now dancing with her husband. There were a couple sitting on the stairs and in the kitchen some of the guests were frying eggs. He moved from group to group like a dog seeking an attractive smell.

Carr was pouring himself a drink from the last bottle of whisky when Helen came up to him.

'Have a drink.'

'No. All right. I'll just have a sherry, a drop. I want to talk to you,' she said.

'At last,' Carr said dramatically. 'You've realized—the Navy's not what it was. All those beards, buttons, braid, so uncomfortable! You turn to . . .'

'Come into the kitchen; they've finished there now.'

'It's not the place,' Carr said, following her, 'where I would choose to receive a proposal, still "all is the purlieu of the god of Love"'. That's what I always say.'

'Darling,' Carr said as they entered the kitchen, 'this is so southern.'

There was a smell of burnt fat; broken egg shells lay on the floor; a woman's handbag had been forgotten on the draining board and a lipstick had rolled out and lay beside it.

Helen sat on a chair by the sink and Carr, responding to her mood when he saw that her expression was serious, perched on an empty beer crate away from her.

'Shut the door,' the girl said.

When he had returned to his crate she said, 'Now tell me about your friend.'

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So that was his sin of omission; the sentry had been sharply recalled to his post. 'There's nothing much to tell.' For some reason he felt embarrassed. 'What do you want? A case history, a report on his moral fibre . . .'

'He's sane, I suppose,' the girl said.

'What is sanity? Who are we to . . . All right, Helen,' he changed his tone, seeing her expression of irritation. 'No more playing. What's happened?'

'Exactly how serious is the trouble he's mixed up in?'

'Oh, that,' Carr said vaguely. 'Well, it's hard to say. What did he tell you?'

The girl hesitated. 'A lot of melodramatic nonsense—of course he's had some drink—self-pity on the surface and . . .'

'Oh, he dramatizes himself,' Carr said. 'But then don't we all.'

'Do you know he carries a gun in his pocket?' the girl said.

'How do you know?' Carr said stupidly. He felt as if something very cold had been laid against his spine and there was a moment of panic.

'He showed it to me. "See this," he said. "This'll do the trick."'

'A gun,' Carr said.

A horror or an absurdity? Carr swore.

'Exactly,' the girl said, 'but . . .'

'What did he tell you?' Carr said seriously.

'To start with I didn't listen very attentively; I thought he was boasting, you know how they do. He was kind of mock-sinister, like a bad-mannered hero in a Hollywood B picture, or . . . well, he did say, "These people don't know what life is. I could tell them." Silly, isn't it? He said he knew that woman who was killed a while back—did he, Derek?'—Carr nodded—'and that the police were after him.'

'That is certainly silly,' Carr swore again. The untidy, smelly kitchen seemed as oppressive as a cell. His skin felt unclean.

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'Where do you come in it, Derek?'

'Don't bother me, Helen.' He could not think clearly. All that was in his mind was: it has come to this.

He said, 'We'd better get back inside.'

As the girl rose she said, 'Are you going to do anything about it? It seems to have upset you.'

'I'll get the gun off him,' Carr replied. The gun, however, was only a prop, a piece of the cardboard set, against which the silly marionettes danced out their fantasy.

'Oh, there you are,' said the woman with whom Carr had been dancing. 'Unfaithful to me, having a tête-à-tête in the kitchen. Have a drink.'

Carr could see Robinson sitting alone on a settee, a glass in his hands, leaning forward looking down on to the floor. 'I have been faithful after my passion,' Carr said to the woman.

He went over to Robinson. 'Had enough?' he said.

'I'm fine,' the boy said. His voice was thick. The unhappiness in his eyes only irritated Carr.

'Drink up. We're going.'

Their hostess tried to persuade them to stay but Carr was firm. Robinson said nothing, except as she escorted them to the door, 'Good night.' He slipped on the last step but recovered himself.

Carr waited until they had passed out of the ambience of the radiogram; then he said, 'Right. I'll have that gun.'

'What gun? What are you talking about?'

'Come on,' Carr said savagely. 'Hand it over.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'For Christ sake,' Carr said. He caught hold of Robinson's arm and swung him round.

'Don't touch me,' Robinson cried in a high-pitched voice and pulled himself away.

Carr went after him. 'Come on.'

Even as he took hold of Robinson again Carr observed a light in a bedroom above them and thought how grotesque their antics must seem if overseen.

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'You're so damned superior,' Robinson said wildly. 'You think you can do what you like with me; they all do, but I . . .'

Carr pinned him against the wall and Robinson kicked out, striking the elder man below the knee. Carr retained his grip on Robinson and struck his face hard, shocked at the pleasure it gave him.

'I'm going to have it,' he said, 'one way or the other. Now.'

As Carr saw that Robinson had surrendered he was overwhelmed by a sense of the squalor of their drunken squabble. He looked up at the lit window in shame and then realized that both he and Robinson had throughout kept their voices low, maintaining their social manners. That made it all the worse!

Robinson gave him the gun and the box of cartridges and Carr put them in his pocket.

'Where on earth did you get it from?' the journalist asked in a conversational tone.

Robinson's reply was inaudible.

'Helen told me,' Carr went on, 'and I thought . . .' He broke off for he realized that words could accomplish nothing.

They walked together like two comrades content in silent contemplation of shared adventures, old loves.

When they reached the corner at which Robinson turned off Carr paused but could think of nothing to say. A perfect moment of silence—as when two hollow dolls are thrown into the same pram. 'Good night' would have been too bare. 'I'll see you some time,' Carr said. Robinson did not reply.

IN the morning Carr took the revolver from the drawer in which he had placed it the previous evening, laid it on his dressing-table among the paraphernalia of a bachelor's toilet equipment. The box of cartridges he left in the drawer, not quite forgetting, but ignoring them. It was one of those mornings when one wakes with the sense that something has come to an end; the old skin has been sloughed. Henceforth there will be a new impetus, a new direction. And of course, the new skin is the *real* one, the other, now discarded, was merely a carnival extravagance. One realizes, Carr thought, on one's return from a holiday that that self who floated with the swell of the azure sea, liked children and strangers, observed birds mating and the patterns of the stars, was also a carnival figure; and not that self who has to earn a living, struggle with existence.

So, as he opened the window, breathed in the cold Atlantic air, he knew that that which had gone before had been a hectic honeymoon period of irresponsibility. He had a lot to do if he was to live it down. His determination to rectify the harm he had done was derived from egotism as much as remorse or concern for Robinson's well-being. He was alarmed because the viciousness he had cultivated denoted something in his own character and way of living that terrified him.

But now there were things to be done! His movements reflected his new-found determination: they were purposeful, brisk, like those of a well-trained soldier . . . but one, perhaps, who lacked whole-hearted enthusiasm for his cause.

Before going down to breakfast Carr put the revolver in his pocket.

His landlady was standing looking out of the window.

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She returned his ringing 'good-morning' with indifference, her placid eyes resting on him as incuriously as they had regarded the street outside. He would have liked to have shaken her. When she bent to put his plate in front of him her dressing-gown fell forward and the full swell of her breasts, still moist from the bed, was just below his nose. He resisted a sudden temptation to indulge in some familiarity.

Instead he said, 'What were you looking at?'

'Looking at?'

'Out of the window.'

'Oh, nothing.'

'Nothing,' he said, and laughed. 'You could look at nothing all day, couldn't you?'

She smiled very faintly but said nothing.

'Nothing much for you today, Derek,' Sisley said as Carr entered the office. 'There's damn-all doing. We could do with another murder.'

'By the way, Norman, is that invitation still on?' Carr said.

'Surely, any time you like.'

'How about this week-end some time?'

'Surely, I'll warn the wife.'

It was because he felt the springs of action within him slackening that Carr compelled himself to go to the police station.

'Stranger,' Holmes said. 'Business or pleasure?'

'Pleasure, mainly,' Carr said. 'Business too, but pleasure mainly.'

'Well?' The detective's smile was as bland as butter.

'How about a game of snooker?' Carr said. 'Can you get away?'

There was always an air of leisured opulence about a billiard hall, Carr thought. Of the eight tables in the room only one was in use when he and the detective entered.

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The light streamed out of the darkness on to the rich green cloth; the gaily coloured balls moved over it, their clicks and rattles, with the shuffle of feet, like wood noises.

One automatically lowered one's voice as if in church. When Carr had potted the first red, he said, 'What about Jean McCariess?'

'Go down, you bastard,' the detective said. His red had jammed in the jaws of the pocket. 'She's dead. I've stuck it up for you.'

'Any developments?' Carr asked, as he played his next stroke.

Holmes was chalking his cue. 'We've made some progress,' he said.

As he walked round the table he looked curiously at Carr but said no more until he had bent to play his shot. 'Why the interest?'

'There's damn-all happening,' Carr said. 'We have to provide some news of cultural interest for the benefit of the compulsorily educated.'

'You know,' the detective said reflectively, 'have I told you before? If I'd met you during the war, I'd have done you under 18B.'

Carr said: 'East-enders are Fascists; officers are Blimps; but intellectuals are merely disgruntled rentiers ineffectually swimming against the current of progress.'

'Not to a policeman,' Holmes said. 'How's your boy friend, Robinson? Why did he leave home?'

'Perhaps he was frightened by the political police.' Carr achieved his facetiousness only with an effort.

The detective played his shot and missed. He turned from the table abruptly and faced Carr. 'If I were to ask you just what the hell you're doing in this you would . . .'

'I would like to tell you,' Carr interrupted quickly and nervously. 'I had an ulterior motive, but it no longer exists, so for you it would be an irrelevance.' He turned to take up position to play again, but added, 'I don't know why he left home. At least, there was no motive based

on anything concrete, which, I suppose, is all that concerns the police, who have no time for psychological subtleties.'

'They can safely be left to the disgruntled rentiers,' the detective said.

Only the colours remained on the table when Holmes said, 'This isn't for publication. You know that it's one thing knowing a thing and another proving it.'

'I see,' Carr said.

'By the way, thanks for the tip about someone smacking young Robinson one.'

'It helped, did it?'

'Among other things. Bits and pieces.'

Why are you playing with me like this? Carr thought. Why these ponderous obliquities, this over-acted professional inscrutability?

The reporter had hung up his jacket before they had started to play. When he went to it for his cigarettes he touched the revolver. He wanted to hand it to the detective; that was his immediate reaction, but then instantly he began to question his motives. What if he had misunderstood the feelings that had appeared to have crystallized the previous evening? Perhaps, after all, he had not relinquished his part and only a temporary failure of resolution had occurred; perhaps he still wanted to interfere with the mechanics of the melodrama, was still seeking to create destruction. He took the packet from his pocket and threw the detective a cigarette.

Carr potted the pink and black to win.

'Two bob I owe you,' Holmes said, looking at his watch. 'I can just manage another game.'

He began to take the balls from the pockets. 'Throw down the black,' he said.

Carr temporized: 'I know you can give no assurance, no guarantee of any kind, but if you were to . . . damn, it's too complicated!'

He walked round the table, up to the detective. 'The

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cock's going to crow any moment,' the reporter said. 'I've got something from Robinson I think you ought to have. I doubt if it's got any bearing on the . . . if it hasn't, can I hope that you won't do anything about it?'

Holmes's smile was one of unconcealed satisfaction. 'Knew there was something,' he said. 'Knew you hadn't just asked me out to take two bob off me.'

Carr felt real alarm. 'You're wrong, absolutely wrong,' he said urgently. 'I didn't. I only just thought of it, getting my cigarettes.'

Holmes stopped smiling. 'Well, you answered your own question,' he said. 'You know I can't give you any guarantee.'

Laying down each word slowly and deliberately like feet on ice, Carr said, 'I have a revolver in my pocket that I took from Robinson.'

'Why, who's been shot?' Holmes said.

'He was boozed and flourishing it about. I thought he was in no state . . .'

'You're probably quite right,' the detective said casually, arranging the reds within the frame.

So even his betrayal was worthless! One cannot wash one's hands with a symbol. The detective had said he had known 'there was something'. Did I, Carr thought with horror, did I, even before I felt the gun in my pocket, have the intention of handing it to him, perhaps even as far back as when I took it from Robinson, or even when Helen told me?

He did not deliver the revolver to Holmes until their game was finished. 'Thanks,' the detective said. 'I might as well have it. No ammunition, I suppose?'

'No,' Carr said, perhaps merely because the question had been framed as a negative.

Having gone so far, it seemed to Carr that he might as well continue.

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'Well, well, you are a stranger,' Wally said.

It was too early for the club to be doing much business. Carr sat at the far end of the bar away from any of the other customers and lit a cigarette from one of the candles. He bought the proprietor a beer.

'I'm doing a story,' Carr said, 'and I want some help.'

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph, sure and you wouldn't be after putting the shebeen in your paper or it's the guard I'd be having on me,' Wally said in a stage-Irish accent.

'Cast your mind back. When I was up here last it was with a young fair-haired chap; do you remember him?'

'Aye,' Wally said, crossing the Irish Sca. 'Ah do an' all. Bit of a gormless-lookin' happorth.'

'Did he try and get in here on his own another night?'

'That's right,' the proprietor replied in his natural voice, after a pause. 'Didn't phone up, just banged on the door. Coo, and 'e weren't 'arf in a styte.'

What, Carr thought, should I ask now to prolong this absurd game? He thought of the detective Holmes and it was in almost conscious irony that he adopted the detective's insouciance. 'Many up here that night?'

'Damn it,' Wally said protestingly. 'I can't remember that. One night's much like another to me. I think it must have been pretty quiet because I went down myself.'

'No idea who was up here?' Carr asked.

''ave an 'art, myte, who'd yer fink I am? The Memory Man?'

His blandness did not seem to be getting him very far, Carr thought. More directly, he said, 'I asked you once about a character who was in here, looked like a gypsy, he . . .'

'Hold hard,' the proprietor interrupted him. 'It's coming to me.' He leant forward. 'Can I ask you what it's all about?'

'No,' Carr said lightly.

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'Aw ryte, aw ryte, no offence meant, guv. He was in here. I know because I had to go down to let him out just after I'd turned your little friend away.'

'Thanks,' Carr said, playing Holmes again. 'Thanks for the information.'

But he had known it all the time, he thought, as he walked along the cold, wind-scraped street beneath the fairy lights that burned and wasted themselves with a human futility. Perhaps everyone had known all the time. The gypsy would sooner or later be taken by the police. So? 'So that is the end of my silly, romantic, little game.' He thought again of the dead woman, the shoe swinging loose and the heel as smooth and round as an apple. And Robinson? Well, he would come through it somehow, if not wiser, at least with scars that would accelerate the appearance of manhood. And . . .

'There are more ways than one of killing a cat!' The thought manifested itself in Carr's mind in words, concrete as pebbles, and, accompanying them, or at least as hard on their heels as the flash that follows the explosion, came an image: of a cat swinging at the end of a rope. The image had frightening clarity: the yellow eyes, the fur upright, the convulsive jerking of the paws . . . And then Carr saw Robinson as the boy had passed him, blank-eyed, alone in his own confined world, after the inquest. He lurched, closed his eyes tightly.

The vision had gone, but it left with him that thought which he could no longer deny, which before he had never acknowledged but now would have to admit. But I have finished with it, he told himself and believed it, and then remembered the circumstances in which he had handed the revolver to the detective. With a deep shudder of self-disgust, Carr thought: 'The mind cannot be trusted; its deceptions and evasions are uniquely cunning. It is when we believe that that for which we are striving is good that

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most subtly we can accomplish the evil that is our heart's desire.'

Nothing had been solved after all, nothing ended. By an effort of will, he knew, he could not 'cry halt to a process that had its origins in the same swamp as his fears and lusts.

Still, perhaps, he could do his best.

SNOW, again. It was still falling when Carr went out, but over the sea the sky was blue and the sun glittered on the water. The snow crunched under the feet of the walkers, and the air was strong, invigorating, as positive as tar. The Saturday-morning shoppers were already about: fur coats in the main street and dogs on leads; and the windows were dressed with the commercial symbols of Christmas.

Carr had slept badly. Normally swift to respond to the varying faces of the weather, he felt this morning crumpled, dusty, as if it were humid or foggy.

First he telephoned Robinson.

'How are you, how are things?' Carr said with an uncharacteristic brightness.

'Oh, all right.'

Carr said, 'Are you free tonight? I thought we might go out of town and do another pub-crawl.'

'I don't know that I can make it.'

'What?' Carr said.

'Look, I'll ring you back,' Robinson said. 'Bit busy now. I'll see what I can do and if I can get out of it. I'll ring you back.'

Carr knew that Robinson would not telephone, but he remained in the office until midday, waiting, as one might wait for the train one knows has in fact already departed.

It was almost one o'clock when he telephoned to the girl. The woman who answered said, 'Miss Rydings? I don't know if she's gone. Hold on a minute.'

When the girl spoke he did not recognize her voice. Twice she said, 'This is Miss Rydings.'

'Oh, hullo. This is Derek Carr. I hope it's all right my phoning you at the office.'

'Oh, yes.'

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Carr said, 'I wonder if I could see you. It's about Martin.' He waited for her to speak but there was no answer.

'Hullo, hullo. Oh, I thought you were cut off. Could you have lunch with me?'

'They're expecting me home for lunch. I don't think . . .'

'Well, could I meet you this afternoon?'

'Yes,' the girl said, drawing the word out hesitantly. 'This afternoon.'

He was at the railway station before their appointed meeting time, but the football crowds were hurrying from the trains and he missed her as she arrived. She was standing by the bookstall when he saw her; as he went up to her he had time to recall other meetings, other women, his wife, and to suffer again a sense of loss that he had thought would not recur. She started and turned quickly when he spoke.

'Oh, these crowds,' she said, as if to excuse her nervousness.

He led her through the crowds from the station. She wore a coat with a hood attached, within which her face was partly hidden from him; he thought she looked older than he had remembered her.

'Would you like to have a coffee somewhere or walk or what?'

He was not really conscious of her, however. How many meetings, at how many railway stations!

'Oh, outside,' she said eagerly. She turned her head towards him and smiled so naturally that for a painful instant he was reminded of happiness. 'Could we get a bus out of town somewhere?'

'Yes, certainly,' Carr said. 'Anywhere in particular?'

'Just the country,' she said. 'The first bus.'

They sat in the front seat on the upper deck. The girl talked with vivacity, smiling and moving her hands, all

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the time, however, not looking at Carr but out of the window. Outside the town the sun shone dazzlingly on the snow-covered fields. the iced ponds.

Perhaps unconsciously he was resisting the sensation of enjoyment; after all, did this girl not bore him? Her comments were superficial, conventional, but occasionally, lightly she said something that was individual, suggestive of personal reflection. Occasionally, too, some expression she used, some tentatively phrased idea, hinted to Carr that her personality was less alien to his than he had previously thought. Yet he resisted.

When the conductor came up the stairs Carr said, 'Where are we going?'

'It doesn't matter,' the girl said, 'where you like. Then she added, 'Perhaps you want to get back; perhaps you don't want to go far; you're in a hurry.'

'I've all the time in the world.'

She was saying: 'To get away, out of town, I like every so often. It's like the snow, a change of scene. I've always lived here, you know. You aren't, are you? You're not a native?'

'I only came two or three years after the war.'

'Do you like it?'

'It's a place in which to live,' Carr said. 'I think perhaps I take myself with me—if you know what I mean—wherever I go.'

'... perhaps it's because I've always lived here,' she was saying, 'but I think I'd be different, feel different, if I lived in a different kind of place. Some people say you are only what your environment makes you, don't they? It makes you feel small, doesn't it—oh, I don't know?'

'To feel that your personality is so dependent on chance, on outside circumstances?'

'Yes, sort of. You feel that it ought not, and yet ...'

'... and yet?'

Well, he had to admit that he was getting a limited enjoyment from this encounter. It was like a respite from

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the battle at a leave centre, but one could still hear the artillery heavy in the distance over the desert.

'If we're going to walk at all,' Carr said, 'we ought to be getting off soon. It'll be pretty cold when the sun goes down.'

'Yes, all right, yes.'

Nevertheless, it was with reluctance that he stepped down from the bus platform.

'Funny, I met you by a bus,' the girl said.

The sun—red as a blood orange—had dropped behind the houses in the deserted village street, and it was cold and grey.

'Well, where do we go from here?' Carr said.

Outside the village they could see the sun again, but it gave no warmth, and at close-up the winter-bound fields were harsher, more oppressive than they had appeared from the bus.

Back from the leave camp, and the shells now were all around him. 'What's the matter between you and Martin?' Carr said fairly gently.

She said—not immediately, 'What has he told you?'

'Nothing much; it was just an impression I'd gained.'

'No, what did he tell you?'

'Nothing really; he said you'd had a row.'

'Yes, we had a row,' the girl said.

Carr glanced at her and then looked quickly away. 'Don't tell me if you'd rather not.'

When she told him he knew that he had known. 'It's quite simple, he wanted me to— to go to bed with him, and I wouldn't.'

'Yes!' Carr said.

'Am I queer? I mean, is it, I wanted to, but I couldn't when it came to it. I don't know why,' she added sadly. 'I thought it would help . . . both of us.'

Carr could say nothing. Both found it difficult to begin speaking again, and for some hundred yards they walked in silence.

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'I am very worried about Martin,' Carr forced himself to say finally. 'I think he is going to pieces. This McCarless affair is, as it were, only a pretext, a superficial cause—it's as good as over now, I think the police have it buttoned up—he, however . . .'

The girl was unresponsive. She walked with her head down, dragging her feet in the snow; disinterested, inlocked.

But he went on: 'I think, after all, probably you could do more for him than anyone. He should go home and he should have you as his girl.'

He felt that it was only because he had so obviously indicated that he was waiting for her to answer that she said, her voice expressionless, 'I'll go and see him. Perhaps he does . . .' her words fading, as if she were not sufficiently concerned to finish.

They kept walking until the sun had disappeared completely behind cloud, and talked of other things. The girl maintained her part in the conversation only with obvious effort.

The street lamps were lit as they entered the country town. There were few people about, and the slanting, aged buildings, the narrow streets added to the impression of silence and remoteness caused by the snow.

The girl said, 'I wish you'd tell me why you're mixed up in this. I know it's not something simple, but can't you explain? I don't understand. I want to understand. It's all rather beyond me, I'm afraid.'

Carr said, 'That is not surprising. I don't understand properly myself.' He was going to leave it at that, but felt then that to confide to another, to this girl in particular, might bring relief, even a kind of sensual pleasure. 'I'll tell you later,' he said. 'I'll try. Shall we have a cup of tea and something to eat?'

Later the inn was bright and warm. The only customers in the bar parlour, they sat by the fire, Carr holding his glass

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between his hands as he leant forward looking into the flames.

He said: 'It is all very difficult to explain. I am myself confused. It is very shocking and unpleasant, and, and it may be that you will be so disgusted . . . but it seems that nothing is simple any more. One's motives are obscure, complicated, and then one has the feeling that whatever one says is simply word-spinning, worse than meaningless because reducing one's actions even to insignificance.

'Did you ever have that form of nightmare when you have been striving to accomplish some supremely important task—it doesn't matter what, you don't remember—but then, just before waking, the task achieved is realized to have been of such desolating futility that . . .'

There was pleasure of a sort in feeling one's way along the walls of thought, into the cracks and crevices, but it had to be resisted. This time words had to accomplish something: he was uncertain what.

'My wife used to say—I am divorced, perhaps Martin told you—that I . . .'

'I didn't know that you were divorced, married,' the girl said.

'It is of no significance,' Carr said. 'For the purposes of this story I may be taken as a bachelor. She used to say . . . well, let me start another way.

'I was attracted by Martin—I don't mean in any sexual manner—attracted by him as if he were my youthful self, another aspect of myself before I became the me I am now. Now this didn't all happen, progress straightforwardly, and I didn't recognize what was happening at the time; you must appreciate that.

'Let's get it out: what I was attempting to do, more or less unconsciously, was to precipitate his destruction. Now, why? I am not naturally a vicious man.'

He paused, looked at the girl rather slyly from the corner of his eye. He thought she had been observing him, but she was staring into the fire.

'Why? Some men I think have within them a fatal flaw. That sounds, perhaps, melodramatic, too romantic'—he was justifying himself, not to the girl, but to some ironic, critical spirit—'but that is what it is. Within them is that defect of character which, no matter what they achieve, makes them work, not just passively acquiesce in, but work for their own destruction.'

'Now, say I am, fall into that category. I identify Martin with myself. So then I must work for his destruction.'

He paused because that was, he thought, a neat syllogism, and also the key to the situation. 'The girl, however, did not seem impressed.

'I say "must" because it is an imperative, an inescapable conclusion.'

It occurred to him to wonder how much the girl understood of what he was saying, whether, even, she was listening.

'So I started, worrying him, working on him. He was amoral; so I gave him a conscience; plagued him, tormented him, tempted him. Of course he was ripe for it. And all this that I was doing to him I was doing to myself through him.'

No, certainly, she was not comprehending. Well, there was one way of capturing her.

'You'—and he sensed rather than saw her turn her head to look at him —'you knew it, I think, knew by instinct that I was the false friend.'

And in his turn he also looked at her. 'What do you think now?'

Her eyes were on him, reflective, ruminative; she might have been looking at a sleeping child.

'Now? What do you mean?'

She had heard, anyway.

'Well, you see, now the problem becomes more complex. I know what I have been doing, regret it and wish to make amends. What simpler, you might say? But, you see, if this flaw, this urge to destruction, does exist, is it possible

that I can just will it away, like, like, throwing off a cold? The germ is still there; it's there for ever, a part of me. So my reformation is not real; does it mean that, or . . .?'—and suddenly it seemed to him that as he spoke a solution, complete, beautiful in its simplicity, had floated into his mind, and then (as in a dream when one discovers the secret of the universe and wakes muttering a senseless formula) it had gone, leaving only an unsatisfactory, partial substitute—'. . . does it mean that now I know my weakness, what is wrong, I can combat it, be on my guard and overcome it?'

He had known, for that infinitesimal fragment of time he had known—and that was not it at all.

'Yes, of course,' he heard the girl say. 'Of course, that's it, now you know. It's like anything else, like being vain or mean or something. If you're conscious of your, your weakness you can resist it. If you are ill you take precautions.'

She was pitying him, and, what was worse, he knew he was not disliking it. 'But you have not understood; it is nowhere near as simple as that.'

She said immediately, as if they had been talking of nothing else, 'Your wife; when were you divorced?'

'Oh, a year or two back.'

'Was it . . . who?'

'Oh, mutual incompatibility.' It was because he knew that he would have liked to have explained to the girl, to have received her naïve sympathy, that he would not talk of it.

Suddenly he noticed that the cuffs of his shirt were frayed. He stretched his arms forward to draw up the sleeves. He said, 'Would you like another drink or—or what?'

And if she had not understood a word, what matter? He turned on her the full force of a smile both comradely and gallant. It was a smile that she had to return, but she lacked the experience to mask her bewilderment.

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After his confession Carr experienced a sense of deflation; or rather, as if he had expelled a poison from his system, but that with it had gone the essential juices that had given him his being. So, he was scarcely Carr any more; he could be anyone. There were vast potentialities; he could be gay or tragic, good or evil; he chose merely to be ironically good-humoured.

And so the rest of the time they spent together that evening passed with neither saying those things that lay behind their cheerful words. As they stepped on to the returning bus, Carr said, 'It's a long time since I've enjoyed an evening so much.'

'Really?' the girl asked, 'truly?'

It seemed to Carr that if he chose to persuade her that his words had been sincere, then retrospectively it would have become true. Instead, he said lightly, so that neither he nor she would believe it, 'A delightful evening.'

Looking down from the bus in the empty square, they could see into a café in which the driver and conductor were hurriedly drinking cups of tea.

The girl said ruefully, almost as if to herself, 'I'm learning, aren't I?'

Carr waited.

'Isn't it funny how people want to get in touch with one another and yet can't? It's like trying to talk through a railway carriage window. Why is it that when we most want to understand and be understood there's always the glass between? Do you always hate yourself as much as you said?'

'Not hate. I didn't say that.'

'No, no, but . . .'

'Perhaps not always,' Carr said, 'perhaps not now.'

'Do you find me very young, very stupid?' With an impatient movement of her head the girl brushed away his gesture of assurance. 'While you know you're all complicated yourself, you think other people are simpler. You have to pretend that they are anyway, in order to

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understand them at all. I wish I knew what you really felt about this evening, about me.'

She paused briefly, but Carr thought she had yet to come to the point.

'I've been wondering whether I'm in love with you,' the girl said, not without dignity. 'But they say young girls are always thinking they're in love when any man pays them any attention.'

The bus jerked into movement.

'We're off,' Carr said superfluously.

'This isn't the last bus, is it?' the girl said.

'No, there's one after this.'

'Derek, I don't know; I feel now in a way I don't want to help Martin.'

He took hold of her gloved hand.

'It's not . . . I don't think it's because I dislike him or wish him any harm, but I'm tired of it all. It's too much for me. I don't want to see him.'

'I still think you should see him,' Carr said, 'but, of course, it's up to you.'

'You see, if I see him, I may find I do still love him.'

She turned her young face, which disappointment, disgust and weariness had not yet engraved with the dignity of maturity, towards him. 'Oh, why do I talk like this about love? I'm not really as silly and romantic as all that. Most people get along without it, don't they?'

'Only because they have to,' Carr said.

With another gesture of impatience, the girl pulled her hand away from his. 'Oh, I'll see him, I suppose, if you want me to. Why shouldn't I?' Her voice was angry, and she turned her head away from him towards the snow-covered fields brilliant in the moonlight.

The street lamp under which they said good night threw a cold, shiny gleam on their faces, like the reflection from smooth metal. As they uttered their pleasantries he felt her eyes intently fixed upon him as if she would see the bone beneath the skin.

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'I'm very glad we went and glad we talked.'

'Yes, I see things clearer now,' the girl said.

I could kiss her, Carr thought, or strike her and it would surprise her no more than it would a prostitute.

'Well, good night.'

'Good night.'

He touched her arm lightly above the elbow as he turned away.

‘FOR you, old man,’ Hargreaves said. Robinson remembered that he had promised to telephone Carr and prepared his lie. The girl’s voice took him by surprise.

‘. . . so I thought perhaps if we could meet?’

‘All right.’

‘Where?’

‘Oh, anywhere, where you like.’

‘By the Post Office, at eight.’

‘All right.’

And so by the Post Office at eight, with the wet snow dripping and dribbling around them, they met.

He had no feeling for her.

‘I don’t want to walk far,’ he said. ‘One of my shoes is letting in water and it’s damned uncomfortable.’

Everything might have been as it had in the past: a chap walking with his girl.

‘Shall we go for a drink?’ he said.

‘If you like, but somewhere quiet, where we can talk.’

Can the very absence of feeling be in itself an emotion? He was not even curious about what she would say, and since she had telephoned he had not reflected once upon the circumstances of their last meeting. He yawned unaffectedly as he returned to the table with their drinks.

‘My foot’s soaking wet,’ he said. ‘There’s a hole. The water soaks right through.’

‘There’s nothing worse,’ the girl said absently.

He showed his first sign of real interest. ‘Alicc, I wonder if you’d darn some socks for me. They’re full of holes. Living on your own, you’ve no-one, and I can’t afford to keep buying new ones.’

The girl said, ‘Yes’, hesitantly.

'Thanks, if you will. I'll make a parcel of them and bring them out when we meet next time.'

She said bitterly, 'You wouldn't like me to come to your room and do them there?'

Momentarily he remembered: a picture of himself on his knees before the girl flashed into his mind, and then, curiously, it was succeeded by an image of the breakwater and a sudden recrystallization of the emotion he had felt when he had found himself standing there. He was irritated with the girl for having brought this about.

'As a matter of fact, I wouldn't ask you.' He remembered also the girl Myrtle, the other betrayal.

The girl said steadily, 'I'm sorry I made a scene about that, Martin. You understand, I couldn't help it. I don't blame you at all. I couldn't help myself. I thought it would be all right, but then I couldn't.'

He accepted her apology graciously. 'It's all right,' he said. Already he had forgiven and forgotten.

'Martin,' she said. 'I want us, can we try and go on as if it had never happened?'

He turned to her with an empty, somehow puzzled look in his eyes. He saw that her nose was shining and that a line of powder had moistened and stuck to her cheekbone. He felt slightly flattered—just as if he had been told that a woman whom he had met briefly and forgotten had confided to a mutual friend that she was attracted by him.

'Of course,' he said kindly. 'Everyone has a row sometime. It was more my fault . . .'

'Oh, Martin,' the girl interrupted him passionately, 'don't be so . . . don't you understand, it's not like that at all. We can't just like this say all right it's forgotten. We can't . . .' She made a gesture of hopelessness, and briefly shut her eyes as if protecting them from a spectacle of agony.

He was genuinely surprised. He raised his brows, which gave him a wide-eyed cherubic expression.

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'We can't just say that we'll forget all about it,' the girl said flatly. And then, with a suggestion of amazed discovery: 'Is it possible that really it all meant so little to you, that all this time, while I've been, yes, suffering, you haven't given a thought to it? We can't just forget all about it,' she repeated.

'But I thought that was what you wanted.'

'Oh, it's like talking through glass. We've changed, both of us. It wasn't only that in your room; it started before then. If we . . . You fool,' she said.

Perhaps she was as astonished as he was. For a moment they stared at each other like old acquaintances, met by surprise, before the dawn of recognition.

'If we're going to try and make it like it was before we'll both have to make an effort,' she said.

Emotion—emotion of any sort—like money, draws out its like, and momentarily somewhere within him there was a stirring, a warmth. It started a complicated chain of reactions . . .

' . . . I'm prepared to make the effort, if you are. I don't reproach you at all, Martin, but you must see it'll be no easier for me than for you . . .'

. . . but it was too bewildering. He resented the uneasiness it brought. For a brief instant he had tasted again fear, desire, interest, the emotions of life, like old memories, and he rejected them.

He shrugged and emptied his glass. 'It'll be all right,' he said indifferently. 'You're making too much fuss. We'll go on as we were.'

The girl drew in her breath deeply and let it out in a slow shiver. 'I'll get you another beer,' she said, 'and then I must go.'

Carr had to compose his face carefully into lines of tender interest before going into her; and yet when his landlady had announced her he had felt a faint pulse of pleasure

within him. The girl was still standing, one hand lightly touching the table.

'I'll put the fire on for you,' his landlady said. She was totally incurious.

'Take off your coat, sit down,' Carr said.

As soon as the other woman had left the room, the girl said, 'It was no use. I went to see him. I did try, but it was no use. It was like talking through glass.'

'Take off your coat,' Carr said again.

She let him take it from her. I could use shock treatment tactics, Carr thought, but perhaps not.

'Well, then, tell me all about it.'

She looked up at him sharply and suspiciously, but his face expressed only solicitude.

'It was hopeless,' she said dully.

'Like trying to talk through glass?' Carr said; and then as she looked up again he went on quickly, 'All right, I'm not teasing you, don't think that, please. Why hopeless?'

She made no reply.

'Why hopeless? Was he hostile at all, or just indifferent?'

'I phoned him this morning and arranged to meet him. I met him by the Post Office -that's where we used to meet often. We went to a pub, I don't know what it's called. He behaved as if nothing had happened, you know, as if, well . . . And when I began to talk to him he didn't seem to understand, or perhaps he wouldn't. It was terrible, because you know I didn't want to, but you said I should, and I think you were right, but I did try. There was a minute when I thought, just a minute, but then he was shut up again.

'It was an eerie experience,' she added more calmly. 'I left him in the pub and I came straight here to tell you. I hope it's all right me coming here.'

'Of course,' Carr said. He was struggling against a sense of pleasure as if it were a malaise, and yet at the same time he experienced a premonition of some unforeseeable disaster. 'And what now, is it all finished?'

'We just said vaguely we'd meet some time; he'd ring me. Do you know, he wants me to darn his socks.' Her voice took on a tinge of scorn. 'Darn his socks! They've all got holes in and now he hasn't got his mother to darn them.'

'He ought to get married,' Carr said, and continued quickly, 'Alice, if you really did try, you've nothing to reproach yourself with. You cannot help those who will not be helped. Did you really try?'

'Yes, I did really. I don't know, perhaps I did it wrongly, but I tried.'

'You didn't want to see him; you admitted to yourself you didn't want to. In those circumstances it's so dreadfully easy to deceive oneself . . .' He felt driven to pursue this—like a husband, perhaps, who persists in questioning his wife's fidelity until in desperation she invents a lover's name.

She just said, 'I know I tried.'

'Of course you did, I'm sure you did. But if . . .'

'Oh, why do you go on?' the girl said, with a bitterness that surprised him. 'I came to see you because . . .' She broke off.

'Yes, why did you come to see me?' Carr said.

'Because I suppose it was because of you I went to see him.' The hostility was still in her voice. 'But you don't give a damn for him or me, only your own—oh, whatever it is you do care about—the game you are playing.'

'My dear,' Carr said as if reproving a child.

'I'm not a complete fool.'

He went over to her then. Crouched forward in the angular arm-chair, she looked tired and shrunken so that he withdrew the hand which he had put out to touch her.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

'You must forgive me,' said the girl.

She did not stay long after that, and she would not let him accompany her home.

IF he had not expected to find Robinson in the Gresham, why had he brought the box of cartridges in his pocket? He had asked himself the question but had not answered it.

'Here, you can have these back,' Carr said. He pushed the box into Robinson's hand.

'Thank you very much,' the boy said insolently. 'Very decent of you. Wasn't there something else, too?'

'That'll keep for the time being,' Carr said.

When he turned back from the bar with the drinks, he saw that Robinson was disposed still to be hostile. He adopted jocularly: 'Come off it, Martin. The independent bachelor life doesn't seem to be suiting you.' For no particular reason, he added. 'Had your socks darned yet?'

Carr had said it with irony but without malice, and the immediate anger of Robinson's response suggested that he had only been awaiting an excuse. The boy laughed histrionically. 'We know everything, don't we?' he said. 'Now, it's Alice you're getting your secrets from. Now that I've seen through you. What else has she told you about me? Do you take her out on pub crawls and tell her she's got a soul?'

The journalist felt the blood rising slowly to his face, and, surprised, examined this phenomenon rather than listened to the boy's savage words.

'I've got a surprise for you: I'm seeing her tonight. I couldn't care less, but she said she wanted to see me. Did you know she was seeing me? You can come if you like. Do you want to come?'

With a show of decisiveness, Carr emptied his glass. 'Right,' he said. 'We're off then.'

The habits of domination and subservience both die hard, and Robinson followed the older man as if it were

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Carr who was taking the initiative. Carr knew, however, as they went out into the street, where the old woman squatted under the verandah by her newspapers as the rain water ran in channels like fuses beneath her, that it was not he who was leading the way; that the pupil had out-paced the master, and the boy would never again surrender to him. And, as he walked with Robinson under the dripping roofs, over the pavements lacquered with a film of black slime, he accepted his new role, not with tranquillity, but with that surrender to the inevitable with which the old acknowledge that the brats they reared, grown brawny and rebellious, have become their masters.

He examined the girl closely, as she turned the coffee cup within her hands. There was, he thought, something hard, almost brassy, about her that evening. Her eyes were bright, the pupils sharpened, and she was forcing down the corners of her mouth so that her bottom lip protruded derisively. She was pale, and the comparatively dark hollows of her face, emphasized by the mean light thrown upwards by the table-lamp, created an impression of debauchery. For the first time he looked at her as an object of desire.

And then it seemed to Carr that they were both waiting for him to speak, the boy slouching back in his chair, his expression sarcastic and victorious, the girl still turning the cup slowly round, her eyes unblinking.

He began to speak very quickly, but without inspiration, without validity, to fill the silence with the beating of wings. This is the moment, he thought, as still he uttered the impotent, tedious words, when once again something decisive could be said, some clear, hard statement of situation and motive be made, that would clear the way for us all to act and to be ourselves. Unless he could find those words the three of them would sit in that café for eternity, without communication or awareness, like dummies in a tailor's window.

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The moment passed and he stopped speaking. After a brief pause the girl said to him in an abrupt, hard voice, 'Well, I suppose there was some reason for you coming along?'

This was the challenge, it seemed on the surface; he was being given another chance; but even as he began to reply he knew that it was not so; the moment that has passed, the opportunity that has been missed have gone for ever.

'As a matter of fact, I was invited.' He turned his eyes to Robinson, almost as if appealing for support, but the boy still lay back in his chair, the amused grimace on his face. 'In any event,' Carr went on with a flash of spirit, 'I thought it would be nice to see you and Martin reconciled.' He regretted that remark immediately and added, more seriously if not with sincerity, 'It did seem to me that perhaps we could sort matters out if we all met together. It was an idea; I don't think now that it was a very good one.'

But apathy had followed his moment of delirium and he cared very little what effect his words had--which was as well, for the girl replied with an unconcealed hostility. 'I don't know that I know what you mean. There's nothing to sort out or there's been enough sorting out.'

Robinson's intervention was almost surprising. 'Derek only meant that we should all try to get back to what we used to be,' he said mildly. 'That was what you wanted, too, wasn't it, Alice?'

'Yes, that's right,' the girl said flatly. She looked up at Carr keenly, the shadows on her face moving to new lines of harshness. In the same quiet, unemphatic tone, she said, 'Why don't you get out and leave us alone?'

Carr thought: yes, she is desirable. He stared at the girl as if he had accepted a challenge. 'Be careful, my dear, it isn't only a matter of sock-darning, you know. Remember the glass,' he said.

And as he left them he felt quite restored, though

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Robinson's voice, jaunty and unconcerned, mocked him again, like a cat-call.

'Poor old Derek,' Robinson said. 'Why did you pitch into him like that?' He had been sincerely surprised.

The girl started as if she had not heard him properly. 'I don't know. It doesn't matter.'

'Still it serves him right, anyway. He's been too bloody patronizing lately.' And with that he dismissed Carr. 'I meant to bring my socks, but I forgot. Was it for anything special you wanted to see me?'

The girl looked up at him quickly and then down on to the table again. 'Your mother came to see me. She wanted me to ask you if you wouldn't go home again.'

He had no great filial affection yet this pleased him.

'I promised her I'd see you and tell you. I didn't want to see you again.'

'How was she?'

'She seemed just the same.'

'Well I might. Why shouldn't I? At least I'd get my socks darned.'

Perhaps in that facetiousness there was an echo of Carr. The girl sighed as if she were tired. 'Well, I've told you. I want to go now.'

'Oh, won't you come for a drink somewhere?' Robinson said, and then as an afterthought, 'Why don't you want to see me again?'

'It doesn't matter,' the girl said, collecting her gloves, her handbag. 'Perhaps I might some time. Come on, I must go now.'

He rose too. 'No, but why don't you want to see me?'

'Good bye, Martin,' she said. 'I expect I shall see you again. Don't worry; it can't end just like this. Yes, I shall see you again.'

FROM time to time during the next few days—mainly at moments of material distress caused by his domestic insufficiency—Robinson recalled the message from his mother. He continued, however, to exist as he had been doing and would probably in time have forgotten it had it not been for a chance meeting with his sister.

In fact, he was growing to enjoy his loneliness, as some people develop affection for a physical affliction. He slept a great deal and would lie for hours in the darkness on his bed in a partial sleep that gave birth to dreams and half-dreams in which he luxuriated. Awake he indulged constantly in fantasies. He had found that he could evolve these most fluently when walking, so that when dreams would come no longer he would throw back the patched bedspread, jump to his feet, and, without washing, go out into the anonymous streets, pacing them without purpose or destination until he felt he was tired enough to sleep and dream again.

The breakwater remained a favourite place of vigil. There, too, he could weave his waking-dreams, and from the bleak harshness of the seascape they acquired a special romantic flavour, satisfying in a unique way to his senses. There was a suggestion of self-sufficiency in the manner in which the salty, brine-encrusted stone jutting into the sea defied the hostility of tide and storm. He was not, however, conscious of the symbolic nature of his satisfaction.

It was as he was returning from one of his visits to the breakwater that he met his sister. He saw her crossing the road towards him, and then without turning his head listened to her steps, slow in indecision, as she came up behind him. He feigned surprise when she spoke, greeting

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her as if their meeting were an everyday occurrence. As they walked side by side, making rather uneasy conversation, he observed with satisfaction that the pertness with which she had habitually treated him had been replaced by something that could have been either respect or solicitude.

'How's everyone at home?' he said, making the first reference to his departure.

'Oh, fine, really, we're all fine.'

'Mum's all right? I must go over soon, but I don't seem to have much time these days.'

'Yes, Mum's fine too.'

A little later she said, 'Mum's a bit upset since you've gone, not that she shows it much but you can tell.'

'I've been thinking I might come back,' Robinson said, to his own surprise. As soon as he had said it, he was steeped in a hot bath-water glow of nostalgia.

'Everything's the same, nothing's really altered really, except . . .' She looked up at him. 'Shall I tell them?'

'No, wait a bit.' A decision should not be made so accidentally.

'Well, shall I tell them I've seen you?'

'Yes,' Robinson said, 'yes', without having heard her.

The water was soaking into him, softening his muscles, taking some of the stiffness out of his bones.

As he walked back to his lodgings thoughts of his home and especially his mother invaded him. Childhood memories, scenes of tedious domestic intimacy were transmuted into tableaux as cheerful and reassuring as those family-circle advertisements for breakfast cereals. It was not love that moved him—his solipsism had driven that out—but his sister's show of affection had stimulated something reciprocal in him.

Back in his room, stretched on the patched quilt, he

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surrendered himself to sentimentality. When he first realized that there was no insuperable barrier to his returning home he shied away from the idea, as a caged animal might retreat from an unfamiliar object thrown into its pen. Then he approached it warily, sniffing it and dabbing it furtively with his paws, before retreating again into the corner of his cage; finally, boldly, he took it in his teeth, savaged it and devoured it.

He was lying on the rumpled bed, exploring with his eyes the yellow patterns of damp on the ceiling and fingering the rash on his face, which had, in fact, latterly improved. The idea of his return home had much resistance to overcome before it ultimately possessed him. His final scenes with his parents before leaving the house had sunk beneath the surface of his mind and he had to drag them up from beneath to find what had been said and done. At first they appeared nightmarish and terrifying but as he went through them painfully, phrase by phrase, they took on a less formidable aspect.

The decision made—or, at any rate, his acquiescence secured—he leapt from the bed, moving with that thoughtless intemperance the weak must adopt in order to act at all.

His letter was brief:

Dear Mum and Dad,

I don't know why I behaved as I did that time. I don't know what came over me, I can't explain it. I expect Sybil has told you she saw me today. Seeing her made me think of you all at home very much and I was ashamed of myself. I would like to come back, though I don't know whether you will want me after the way I behaved. I apologize very sincerely and hope you will accept my apologies. If you do will you write to me here and let me know?

*Love to you both,
Martin.*

When he had written the letter he descended to the

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odorous depths of the basement and knocked on his landlady's door.

'Mrs. Brogan, I think I shall probably be leaving soon. I think I'd better give you a week's notice, will that be all right?

'By the way, I wonder if you've such a thing as a twopenny-halfpenny stamp? Oh, it doesn't matter, thank you anyway.'

Up in his room again, he hastily packed some of his belongings while the fever of action was still upon him. Then he subsided on the bed. That evening for the first time for many nights he did not go out.

'I wonder if you've such a thing as a twopenny-halfpenny stamp?' They were Robinson's first words on entering the office the following morning.

Hargreaves was bent over his desk, rummaging in a drawer. He did not answer and Robinson asked again, 'Peter, have you a stamp?'

Hargreaves did not look up. 'Sorry, I haven't.'

As Robinson began to draw out his files he heard Hargreaves opening and shutting drawers, the rustle of papers. It was perhaps because of the sudden cessation of movement that he looked up. Hargreaves was standing upright behind his desk, looking thoughtfully and anxiously in front of him. His eyes were focused on or near Robinson.

It was only as the boy asked the question that he remembered. So fully had his fantasies occupied his mind that the real events of the past had been crowded out. 'What's up?'

'It's damned awkward, a stinker. I've had something acquired, pinched.'

'Pinched? Where from?' Such an answer had been expected.

Hargreaves was speaking as if to himself. 'I know it was

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there. From my drawer. There's no other possible place. Of course, I was a bloody fool.'

'What was it?' Robinson said, because he had to.

'A gun.'

'A gun,' the boy repeated.

'I showed it you, didn't I? Did I show it to you?'

'I don't know,' Robinson said. 'I can't remember.' It was true; he could not remember. 'Perhaps it's a joke. Are you sure?'

'Of course I'm sure. No joke. There was some ammo and that's gone too.'

'Well?' Robinson said, trying to appear just mildly concerned.

'I shall have to report it.'

That blow was more or less expected. 'Had you a licence?'

'No, of course not,' Hargreaves said. 'That's the hell of it.'

'You'll get into a hell of a row.'

'I know that,' Hargreaves said irritably. 'But you can't have any bloody fool running about with a loaded gun. You never know, you know. It might be anyone.'

'Well, what will the police be able to do?' Robinson said weakly.

'I expect they know their drill.'

'When did it go?' Robinson asked; but without waiting for an answer went on, 'Why not wait a day or two and see if it turns up?'

'How can it, for crying out loud?'

'Well, someone may just have borrowed it and will bring it back.'

'Can do,' Hargreaves said unhappily, and added, mustering the wry smile of an Englishman in adversity, 'It'd better or I'll be spending six months in the glass-house.'

Just before they went for lunch Hargreaves said, 'Oh, did you want a stamp? I've got one after all.'

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'That's all right, thanks,' Robinson said. 'I don't want it now.'

He telephoned the newspaper office from the first kiosk he came to. There was a long delay before Carr came to the telephone, and all the time Robinson scratched nervously at his face.

'I've got to see you. Immediately. Now.'

'No go, I'm afraid,' Carr said. 'I'm tied up.'

'But I've got to, I tell you.'

'I'm sorry, but I don't see how I can.'

'You've got to, or . . .'

'Oh, all right, but I can't until this evening. If you've got to see me.'

He waited for the reporter outside the Public Library, impatiently pacing between the telephone boxes and the bicycle racks, among the tied dogs, and the old men shuffling up and down the steps. As he saw Carr cross the road, step on to the pavement, his open coat blown out like wings by the wind, a stab of fierce hatred for the elder man shot through him.

'I've got to have the gun back,' Robinson said at once, disregarding Carr's greeting. 'I've got to have it. You can't play any tricks on me this time. At once.'

The hatred became almost insupportable as he saw Carr smile—patronizingly it seemed—and as the journalist began to speak, Robinson grasped his arm tightly.

'I must have it now. Give it to me.'

Carr began to try to disengage himself, but as Robinson's grip did not slacken relinquished the effort.

'I don't carry dangerous weapons about with me, Martin,' he said with an attempt at lightness that to the boy seemed mockery.

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'You can get it. We'll go and get it now.'

Yet even as he persisted he felt as if he were only going through the motions of determination and that the gun, or whatever it was that it stood for, had passed for ever from his reach, as irrevocably as if it had been thrown into the sea.

Carr's delay in replying seemed only to indicate unconcern.

'Where is it?'

'I've got it put away safely,' Carr said, 'but I just can't get it at immediate notice.'

'You're lying,' Robinson said, tightening his grip on Carr's arm and pushing his face close to the reporter's. 'You are trying to trick me. We're going to get it now.'

Carr's jerked himself free suddenly. 'What do you need it for?'

Robinson could discern that his adversary was unsure of himself, though he did not guess the cause. 'What's that to you? What do you care? It doesn't matter to anyone but me.'

Bluffing, Carr said with a show of decisiveness, 'Because unless you tell me and unless I believe you I won't give it to you.'

If he had expected this to produce an outburst it was not forthcoming. Robinson sounded almost puzzled. 'It, it wasn't mine, you know. I borrowed it and the chap wants it back.'

'Yes,' Carr said. 'Who lent it to you?'

'All right, I took it from his drawer, but now he's missed it and I've got to put it back.'

Carr turned half away and the wind when he spoke muffled his words.

'What did you say?'

'I said, "All right, I'll get it for you as soon as I can." I'll ring you.' Carr's voice was without expression. He looked directly at Robinson and began to raise his arm in a gesture that, oddly to the boy, suggested supplication.

'You're not tricking me?'

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'I'll get it for you as soon as I can,' Carr repeated, still without expression. 'I must get back to the office. I'll ring you.'

Robinson let him go and watched him walk away. Carr staggered when the full force of the wind struck as he reached the corner, but he put his head down and turned into it.

THE gale increased and blew unremittingly all night and the next morning too. In the streets it was like a demon, buffeting and harrying the walkers, twanging nerve strings, making for error. Sometimes above the sky would be blue, a pale laundry tint, but then masses of white cloud would be piled across it, and these would shade off into grey and black. When the rain came it was in sharp, vicious bursts that were driven by the wind almost parallel with the pavements.

Carr was caught in one of these rain squalls as he made his way from the police station to his lodgings. He scorned to seek shelter and took pleasure in his beating.

The letter was on the table in the hall. He picked it up, held it in his hand a moment and then, with a nervousness that resembled superstition, put it in his pocket and went in for lunch. Even afterwards in his room he held it again in his hand, trying to discern significance in its thickness, in the writing on the envelope, before impatiently tearing his finger raggedly beneath the flap. He read it standing by the window which was clattering in its frame like a rattle.

Dear Derek, (his wife wrote)

This is a difficult letter to write. I have your letter in front of me and could try to write something in keeping with its mood but I think you will probably when you read this be far removed from that mood. I suppose you do remember what you wrote.

I seem to be playing with words when I should be answering you plainly. Well, the answer is, Derek, that I am not prepared to start again. I could not go through it all again. Now that I have written that I suppose I could end the letter. It was you who told me that when something is over the kindest thing is

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to let it die. You also said once: the best way we can show our pity for people is by letting them alone. You know how I respected your wisdom in these delicate matters of personal relationships. Now, however, you seem—if I am wrong, I am sorry—to be asking for my pity. I thought you had more pride. Having learned my lesson from you—in more than one way—I am going to leave you alone.

All that perhaps sounds more bitter than I really am. You ask, why did we fail? Of course, I also went over that in my mind again and again. At first I was inclined to blame myself but now I think—you always preferred me to be honest—that you were the more to blame.

I could say that you were too selfish or too self-centred but that would be a simplification. You were often very generous and often very kind. Only you could only love me occasionally, not for myself, but when you could fit me comfortably into your own private drama, your own idea of things—such as the night in Darlington, yes, I remember it! You could never accept things as they were. You had always to create situations. It might have been all right if I had been prepared to suffer with you, but I don't like suffering very much.

I have reached the stage now where—if there was any point in it—I could see you. I don't regret our time together, quite apart even from Carol, whom you can see of course whenever you want to. She is very well at present and very good, except for a precociousness that leads sometimes to embarrassing situations. Let me know if you want to see her.

I really do mean all this, Derek. Good luck,

Yvonne.

PS. I must be getting old, for now I can tolerate the thought of belonging to the bourgeoisie.

It was the postscript that bothered him. Apparently it was in answer to something he had written but he could not remember the reference. He puzzled over it to the exclusion of everything else in the letter. It irritated him like a word that one knows one knows but cannot recall.

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After he had lit a cigarette, Carr glanced through the letter again, the corners of his mouth drawn in as if sucking away bitterness. He held the sheets thoughtfully for a moment, tapping them against the palm of his other hand, and then he tore them across twice and dropped the pieces into the grate. There was no sense of disaster and Carr realized that he could have been expecting nothing else. Only the room seemed a little colder, the streets through the window lashed by the rain a little more desolate and the sky darker.

Yet the mere hour or so previously when he had left the police station he had realized with astonishment that an unfamiliar optimism was pumping vigour into his steps, deeper breaths of air into his lungs. He had gone without hope, in order only that he could console himself with the reflection that he had at least tried.

Certainly at first the detective had been reluctant to give him the gun, but Carr had discerned the absence of determination in his initial refusal—almost an absence of interest—and under the journalist's persistence Holmes gave way.

'He can't do any harm with it. I told you there was no ammunition. But it isn't his, you see, and he must return it. Show that warm-heartedness that is so characteristic of the forces of law and order in our gallant little island,' Carr had said.

'This is just a matter of personal friendship,' the detective said seriously.

'I sincerely appreciate it,' Carr said.

He had signed the receipt.

But now that sense of optimism seemed foolish, as empty as a boxer's boasts before his humiliation in the garish arena. Still, the boxer, even when he knows his defeat is inevitable, may fight on for a few rounds, not from any highfalutin principle of pride nor in order to prolong the spectacle for those who have paid good brass for the sight of blood, but simply because once a man has started to do

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something, he must continue—save forcible restraint—until he makes the decision to stop. The harder one is punched, the harder it becomes to make a decision, even that which will save one from the punches.

So Carr telephoned to the Town Hall. Robinson was not available, but the journalist left a message that if the boy would visit him that evening he would have something for him.

In the afternoon he had an especially tedious assignment on the outskirts of the town. It took longer than he had anticipated and the report that he wrote in the office—whose floors were strewn with balls of paper, whose ash-trays overflowed on to the desks, whose uncovered typewriters grinned like skulls—went badly, so that he was late to depart.

The wet was seeping through his mackintosh at the shoulders as he went out beneath the swinging lights that filled the street with moving shadows. The late-homing workers walked quickly, heads down into the wind.

The pub by the station was almost empty. The gas poker still hissed beneath the charcoal fire, beside which, half-asleep, chins sunk on their chests, were two old men in seedy greatcoats, waiting, perhaps, for that long-priced winner that would never run. The barmaid, a plain and breastless woman, broke off her conversation with the waiter-on in his stained white jacket to serve Carr with a rum.

He sat at the other side of the fire from the old men, who took no notice of him at all, not even raising their heads when he dragged forward his chair, as if he were incorporeal. He huddled over the fire, glancing at the evening paper, alternately raising to the flames one foot and then the other, from which the steam arose like marsh-mist. His first rum seemed meagre so with the second he ordered—for food, as it were—a bottle of stout. He felt the warmth of the second rum spreading in his chest like a flower unfolding. And then the third rum.

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The fire had burned up and Carr pushed back his chair, this time to stride to the bar with vigour. Now there were a number of men standing with glasses in their hands. The fraternity! There was fraternity, too, when we sat on the steps outside the sunken canteen hut, tossing the bottles over our shoulders to fall plop into the sand, under the purple sky, bawling the words of our songs, to fall plop into the sand.

And when he looked up the old woman in black, with a string bag on the table in front of her, smiled into his face.

'You've got to have a little comfort these days, haven't you?' she said.

'Indeed you have,' Carr replied.

And he remembered another woman who a long while ago had bent over a corpse—but, no, there could have been in fact no corpse—and had said, 'God is not mocked.'

'I'll be honest with you, I'm telling you, it's my only comfort. "Give it up, Mary," my friend said. "It'll be the death of you, you and your bottle of stout," she said. "Give it up," I said. "Why that'd be the death of me, like throwing the baby away with the bath water."'

Suddenly there was a sweep of desolation spread all around him like a sluggish, oily sea. Yet as one of the fraternity and with the rum warm within him he could endure it.

'Still it's very nice bath water,' he said, and his words fell plop into the oily sea.

The old woman cackled hoarsely. 'Very nice bath water,' she said. 'That's good, that is. Very nice bath water.'

Plop, plop went the bath water.

'God is not mocked,' Carr said quietly to the woman as he went by her and out.

But in the street he was back to normality, well, almost, anyway. Only all the lights, multiplied by their reflections on the wet roads, dazzled, like the sun on sand or on an oily sea.

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He was watching from the corner by the bar a young couple seated at a low table just within the lounge. The boy puts his hand on her arm and she looks up at him, coquettish, tender, and Carr feels like God—or as God might feel if the devil were not evil but only mischievous. And she says something insulting to him, so that he raises his eyebrows in mock indignation, and he says something insulting to her so that she throws her head sharply away in mock anger, and God watches them both benignly as they lean forward and press hands, and laugh into each other's faces.

But God, by the bar, with the two glasses—the small one with the brown dregs of spirit like a dose of medicine and the long one, fluted, with the spumes of beer on its sides—becomes bored with his children and smiles grimly to himself. Then he stops smiling. And then he smiles again. And for a moment he closes his eyes. And then he opens them again. And opening them he sees his face reflected in the mirror behind the bar, but he sees it suddenly not as the familiar battered mask but broken down into its components: strange—as the surface of the moon seen through a telescope; face disintegrated into eyes, nose, mouth, mole, embossed on a surface of white plasticine. He empties the long glass and goes out again.

And somewhere outside standing in the middle of the pavement the woman points upwards. 'There, there . . . you can see it now,' she says. 'I can't see anything,' her companion says. She looks fragile, like a sick woman. 'It was there,' she says almost pleadingly, 'I saw it.' 'Well, it isn't there now,' the man says.

Carr's throat and mouth are filled with cotton-wool. He takes the small glass fastidiously between his third finger and his thumb, raises it to the hole in his face, swallows, and the sickly petrol-like spirit slides down. The cotton-wool disappears.

Carr thinks: What had that woman seen in the sky? Did I see a woman pointing to the sky?

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'When the seagulls come in—you see them on the golf course—you know then it's going to be bad, really bad.' Someone else had said that. Or had someone else said that?

And now someone else, adjacent along the bar, is saying: 'That's one thing you shouldn't do never. I know, I tell you. You shouldn't never leave your watch lying on a cold surface. Christ, don't I know what I'm talking about!'

'I really couldn't say I'm sure,' Carr says, or in fact doesn't say, or if he says it, says it so that no-one hears him say it.

The long glass and the small glass.

And now he is talking himself. 'In drink's house there are many mansions,' he is saying. 'But God is not mocked. He knows a true drinker when he sees one, on the sea or in the desert, plop. Did I tell you about that time I held my brother's hand on the march? I use the word brother figuratively of course, being an only child. Comradeship is all. Fraternity, acidity and sodomy. There was a night once when we'd beaten it off to some wog village—out of bounds, of course --to raise hell and we got drunk on arak. Well—you know arak, a bit like vodka --well, arak is really the most frightful stuff to get drunk on and we got lost and we slept somewhere in the desert in the sand. And -- what, what was I going to say? Oh, yes, in the morning, woke up, and there was, there were, bloody great birds, their wings like, like, like . . . dark shadows . . . and these birds . . .'

'There was a mate on the ship,' his companion is saying. 'Toughest bastard I ever knew. All the crew, and they were Liverpool toughs too, and they are tough, were scared stiff of him. Well, when I tell you he used to pick out the biggest, toughest, first week every trip and fight him, make him fight, and fight they did, just to show them who was boss. I saw him break three men's jaws. But he was like, like you were saying, like a kid over birds, always had one in his cabin, talk to it he would, kiss it. It made

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you think to see him with these birds. And, you know, he hadn't a hair on his body.'

The small glass and the long glass,

And then somewhere else he is with three other men. 'Cheers,' he says. The long glass. And then 'Cheers,' he says. The small glass.

'He's in a fine old state tonight, isn't he, the old bastard,' someone is saying. 'So communicative and witty. Some people of course drink to become eloquent.'

'I could tell you things,' Carr says, 'things you would never conceive of.'

'And some people, of course, drink so that they can't conceive.'

'Things you would never conceive of. I could tell you . . .' And he just walks out.

And then there is a period of darkness.

And then Carr is sitting alone at a table under some stairs in a large vaulted room which appears to be full of fog, fog so thick that not only can he scarcely see the bar at the far end but so thick as to muffle, as if with cotton-wool, the voices of those talking within the room.

He is leaning forward on the table, taking the weight on his forearms. The lids are drooping over his red-rimmed eyes; his face is white and puffed and the shape has gone from his mouth and jaw. But he contemplates the fact of his drunkenness with some satisfaction. He is thinking slowly, in words rather than in concepts.

'Time,' Blake said, 'is the mercy of eternity,' but can there be both time and eternity? Did he mean rather that time is the guise assumed by eternity to mask from men its terrible, inescapable reality. Even alcohol is sufficient to reveal the illusiveness of time, but no alcohol, not even death, can save one from eternity.

The landlord is shouting 'Time.' Eternity, gentlemen, if you please! Carr would shout back to him, shout in his teeth that time is no time, is not time, is timeless, betimes is timely, is time-honoured, time-serving, time out of mind

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and meantime is full-time and half-time and Timons of Athens; but the cotton-wool is back in his throat again and when he raises the small glass to the hole in his face he finds himself unable to swallow.

Outside the trees reel against the stars. He is alone in a street of shapes that he can neither hear nor see, and the sand and the oily sea slide and pitch beneath his feet. He leans against a wall and closes his eyes, but God is not mocked and he feels the world spinning around him. If he keeps his eyes closed the world will spin him away, will spin him away with the reeling stars, away from the invisible, inaudible shapes, from the birds on the golf course to the cold eternity where there is not even the illusion of time.

He takes a few steps forward and vomits into the gutter. When he straightens himself he sees the passers-by step away from him in disgust. He is back in the world again. He exists again. Existence is the smarting of his eyes, the pulse beating painfully behind his forehead, the stale taste of the vomit in his mouth.

And then he goes home.

‘NO, sorry, he’s not in yet. Any message?’
 ‘I’ll ring later,’ Robinson said, putting down the receiver.

He fingered the box of ammunition in his pocket. The question was whether there would be any point at all in returning it without the gun. On the whole he persuaded himself against it. It was perhaps his reluctance to take any action, a kind of paralysis of the will, that was the deciding factor. Since the previous evening when he had called at Carr’s lodgings four times in two hours until the landlady had been stirred from her placidity to drive him away with upbraidings, it had been like this, the will inert and sluggish.

When Hargreaves came back into the room, Robinson said with a schoolboy-like deceitfulness, ‘The revolver, it hasn’t turned up yet, I suppose?’

‘No,’ Hargreaves said.

‘You haven’t told the police yet?’

‘Not yet.’

Hargreaves did not leave the room again until lunch-time and then when Robinson telephoned the newspaper office he was told that Carr had been in but had gone out. It was mid-way through the afternoon before the boy had another opportunity to use the telephone privately.

‘Yes?’ he heard Carr’s voice.

‘It’s me, Martin.’

‘Oh, yes, Martin, I . . .’

‘Four times I called round last night, four times. Where were you? You promised me. You’re playing with me again. You haven’t got it, you . . .’

‘I’m sorry. I have it. You can have it whenever you want. I got caught up.’

‘I don’t believe you. I must have it.’

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'All right,' Carr said. 'Come round here when you've finished work. Good-bye.'

He had wrapped the revolver carelessly in a piece of newspaper and when he entered the reception room held it out to Robinson without a word. The boy grabbed at it and put it in his pocket.

They looked at each other.

'I'm sorry,' Carr said. 'I wasn't caught up. I was getting drunk. Or perhaps it's the same thing.'

It was the elder man who looked away. His head ached; the skin of his forehead felt as if it were drawn tight across the skull. It was, possibly, because the palms of his hands were sweating that he rubbed them together, as if washing them, before he said, 'Well, cheerio, then.'

After normal working hours the keys of the various sections were hung in the porters' room. Robinson hesitated outside the entrance.

'I don't care what you bloody say. A bloody forward who can't hold a bloody ball isn't a bloody forward,' a voice inside the room was saying.

He tiptoed back into the adjoining toilet room. He wanted time to think it out, but he could not concentrate his thoughts. He made water, washed his hands, looked at himself in the mirror, fingered his scabs. Then he went to the window to look out on to the municipal gardens, with the chairs and tables of the café stacked against the palings. A young woman was bending over a man in a bath-chair adjusting his blanket. As she straightened she seemed to turn her face towards Robinson and he instinctively stepped back from the window. He left the toilet.

'And as for Blackhouse he couldn't kick my bloody arse.'

The porter on duty was a big man with bony features

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over which the red skin fell in folds like the peel of a fruit which has decayed within. He had been talking to the Mayor's chauffeur.

'I want the key,' Robinson said.

'Only heads of departments and assistant heads of departments can take out the keys, you know that.'

'I, I left something in my room.'

'And I suppose you want me to get it for you. Nine till five, you're all the bloody same, with your nice white collars, think we've nothing to do but run after you.'

'No,' Robinson said in alarm. 'I don't want you: to get it. It doesn't matter.'

The porter might have continued the play a little longer, but at that point there was the sound of footsteps in the hall outside. As he went out he said to Robinson, 'All right, take the key, but mind you bring it back sharp.'

So Robinson, still not thinking, took the key, went up the ornate staircase, opened the door of the clerks' section, walked along the partitioned corridor to the room he shared with Hargreaves . . . to find that that, in its turn, was locked. The key of that door was not hung in the porters' room: indeed the room was seldom locked, could only have been locked by Hargreaves who must hold the key.

Hate then for Hargreaves, who had frustrated him, then hate again for Carr that swallowed the earlier hate. He did consider leaving the revolver and the cartridges in one of the typists' rooms, but remembered in time that if a stir were caused the porter would recall his presence that evening. He rattled furiously the locked door-handle, as if his passion could break down its resistance. Then he released it and smiled. The thought had slid into his mind: 'To-morrow will do just as well.' The thought had slid into his mind and so he grasped it and held it and so he moved his mouth into the shape of a smile—such a smile as one sees sometimes on the face of a person opposite in a train or bus and from which one averts one's eyes in a kind of apprehensive shame.

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'Directors choose the bloody team, but do they . . .'

Robinson put the key back on its hook. 'Good night,' he said.

And out, across the municipal gardens into the street, the shape of a smile still on his face. As he turned towards the approaching stream of traffic before crossing the road he saw again the woman pushing the man in the bath-chair. She held her head high, her face closed like a deserted warehouse, looking straight in front of her at nothing; and briefly Robinson pitied her, but by the time he had crossed the street he had forgotten.

Great pear-shaped globules, like pendent drops of blood magnified except that they were of varied colours, hung all around. They had the consistency of breasts but their texture was like that of coarse sacking. For an instant they would appear to move but then again they were still, so that the effort to decide whether the motion or the immobility were illusion was an abysmal anguish.

Even in dreams one can withstand only a limited degree of agony. Carr awoke, forced some saliva into his mouth, looked at his watch. It was only eight o'clock. He had fallen asleep leaving the light burning. The evening paper was crumpled under his shoulder; he dragged it from beneath him petulantly and pushed it off the bed.

He swung his feet on to the floor. His head still ached but where there had been a dull pressure over the surface of the skull there was now only a single sharp point of pain above his left eye. He rubbed the skin of his forehead and face as if he would knead it into numbness.

Even after he had washed he was wrapped in sleep and dream as in a thin envelope that muffled his perceptions, filmed over the feeling surface of the skin. When his landlady stopped him at the foot of the stairs he had to ask her twice to repeat her domestic query and then answered vaguely. The sense of disembodiment persisted in the

street, so that he walked clumsily like a man distrustful of his capacity after an operation; persisted even under the bright lights of the Gresham, rubbing shoulders at the bar, breathing the air soured by the others who breathed. Yet humanity is inescapable and by the time he saw the boy he was losing something of his feeling of incorporeity and, glass in hand, was ready again to become a member of the race.

He watched Robinson pushing through the crowd of drinkers and thought how now he had lost his air of shyness and walked without self-awareness or curiosity. And when their eyes caught there was nothing Carr could do but join the boy.

'Drink,' Carr said, 'is a great provoker of four things, and the fourth is the most appalling headache. Can we find a table, move away from this a little?'

'All right about the gun?' Carr said.

He did not even hear the boy's answer.

They talked for a while in clipped, verbless phrases as men in bars do who have nothing to say to each other.

In a pause Carr thought suddenly: it is time I left this town.

As soon as the thought entered his head he wondered why he had waited so long.

He interrupted Robinson. 'I'm thinking of leaving this town,' he said.

'Leaving?'

'I can always get a job on another paper.' He was thinking aloud rather than informing the boy. 'There's nothing to keep me here. I've been here long enough in fact. One gets rusty. Movement helps to ward off boredom. A nuisance the actual physical business of departure, of course, finding somewhere tolerable to live and so on. You have to work a damn sight harder too when you go on a new paper, getting to know the town; it's the same with one's pleasures, too, naturally. Down South, I think—

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not London though, no large city, hundred thousand maximum.'

In one instant the idea was born; in the next he had familiarized himself with it. Now it was as if it were a decision he had made weeks previously. He felt almost light-hearted, as if he were about to start a holiday.

'Does Alice know you're going?' Robinson asked unexpectedly.

'Alice, oh no, good heavens no, I haven't seen her for weeks.'

'How long a notice do you have to give?'

Carr had to ask Robinson to repeat the question.

'Oh, a month. Union agreement.'

'I'm probably going home,' the boy said.

'Home?' Carr repeated vaguely.

'I mean back home to my people.'

'Oh, yes, of course. Good. As a matter of fact, I thought you seemed chirpier this evening,' he lied politely. 'I'm sure you're doing the right thing. It's no fun living in digs these days, not like before the war, when . . .'

'I shall have to spend Christmas here,' he went on, 'but should get away in the New Year. That's a good time to move. Perhaps this new year I shall . . .'

'I saw my sister the other day and she said they wanted me back at home, now all this fuss is over.'

'Carr reborn in the New Year. Kitsch! But the simple symbolism is rather pleasing.'

'And there's no doubt that I'll be more comfortable at home.'

'I'm sorry I didn't meet you earlier with the gun,' Carr said. He had already almost departed. The time had come to tie up the loose ends, shake hands with one's enemies.

'That's all right,' Robinson returned equably. 'I'll put it back in the morning now.'

'Oh, you haven't put it back yet?'

Carr ordered two drinks from a passing waiter and there

was a lull in their conversation. One was returning home; the other was departing.

Tying up the loose ends, Carr said, 'I wonder if they will make an arrest.'

He did not wait for Robinson to comment. 'By God, it was a queer affair, wasn't it?' His voice took on a livelier tone. 'And how we got landed right in the middle of it—well, you more than me,'—anxious to be fair. He clicked his tongue in a kind of wonder.

It was something to take away with him; would be something to store up against the future. That town! God, yes, I remember. Four or five years after the war it would have been . . . but that was in another country and besides the wench is dead. Literally, by heavens!

'It has been an extraordinary interlude, hasn't it?' Carr said, this time waiting for the boy to answer.

'It's not been much fun for me,' Robinson muttered, sulkily perhaps.

'No?' Carr said blankly, and went on with more animation: 'You know, I scarcely knew you before the unfortunate Mrs. McCarless. You were just a chap in the Town Hall. It seems longer than that, doesn't it? We've had some fair times, haven't we? You and Alice and all the rest—have you seen that fellow Hyams lately?'

'He's over there,' Robinson said, indicating with his hand.

Carr turned and saw the Jew in a characteristic pose leaning over a table at which four women were sitting; they were all laughing.

'He's quite a character in a way, isn't he?' Carr said. 'Apeneck Sweeney. What a boy!' The Jew too would have his place in the fabulous narrative.

'We've had some fair times, haven't we?' Carr repeated reflectively.

Robinson only grunted in reply, and, in atonement for his self-absorption, Carr said, 'I'm glad you're going

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home.' He was about to add, 'Is it all right with Alice, too?' but felt a sudden reluctance to speak of the girl.

It was while he was examining this reservation that he heard Robinson, speaking slowly as if each word were drawn with pain, say, 'I shall never forget her.'

'Never forget her,' Carr repeated in amazement. 'I don't understand. Have you two finally finished, I mean completely?'

'It can never happen again. No, I don't mean Alice,' Robinson said impatiently. 'Her. I shall never have another woman like her. There can't be many like her.'

'Oh, I see,' Carr said.

As Carr was emptying his glass, the boy said, 'It really is all over now, isn't it? Funny, I feel that too, though nothing's changed really, I mean there hasn't been any arrest or anything. But it's the first time I've really felt since it started that now it's over.'

'It might never have happened,' Carr said rather distractedly, as he rose to his feet. 'Well, of course I shall be seeing you before I go. We'll have to have a farewell symposium.'

‘WHY have you come?’ Carr said.

The girl stood within the porch, outlined against the yellow glow of the street lamp behind her. He could not see her face, but one ungloved hand was moving like an animal against the lapel of her coat.

‘Is it raining? Do you want to come in or shall we go out?’

‘It doesn’t matter. No, I don’t think so. No, it isn’t raining.’

Her sudden presence filled him with a sense of an unknown ‘disaster, as some people are affected by the arrival of a telegraph boy.

‘All right, out then. I’ll just get my coat. Excuse me.’

The promenade was deserted. There were great blocks of darkness between the lamps, and the trees’ shadows distended over the roadway carving it into rough rhombs and parallelograms.

‘Did you come because I am going? Martin told you, I suppose.’

‘Going, where going?’ She turned her head to look at him.

‘Didn’t he tell you? Why did you come then?’

‘Going where?’

‘I’m leaving. Funny, in my egotism I thought you had come to say good bye.’ He spoke questioningly, but she made no response and he went on. ‘I’m leaving this town, going down South, another job. It’s virtually fixed.’

They were walking in step but the sharper clack of her heels drowned his footsteps.

‘I just felt I wanted to see you. I didn’t know you were going,’ the girl said finally, as if she felt some words were required.

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'I shall be here for Christmas.'

'Oh, yes, it wouldn't be very nice, a stranger in a strange town.'

'It was at Christmas that my wife left me,' Carr said. 'She went away from me while I was sleeping.'

Was he seeking her pity? If so, he despised himself for it. In any event, she withheld it.

Why had she come? They had reached the end of the promenade, but the girl continued, following the pavement, so that now they were walking beneath the skeleton silhouette of the scenic-railway on the deserted fairground.

'I don't feel self-pity about it, my wife having left me, I mean,' Carr said, more for his own benefit than the girl's.

'Yes,' the girl said meaninglessly.

Heavy clouds had submerged the moon and it was quite dark. He put his hand to her elbow to steady her as the pavement became less regular and felt that she was trembling, not violently, not from a sudden panic, but as one whose nerves were stretched tight, for a desperate action perhaps, or an action that went against her ordinary nature.

He could not think of the words that would deter her, or some nihilistic sense of 'Oh, what does it matter?' kept him from uttering them.

The sea was in front of them, but the tide was low and they could hear only the faint susurrations of the water on the sand in the distance. Would she? Or would her ordinary self not be overcome?

'Do you think it's funny I came to see you like this?'

'No,' he replied briefly, the suspense of watching her struggle now even affording him a little amusement.

She began three words, but broke off each time, then said rapidly: 'I can't explain it. There was no particular reason. Do you think I am very foolish?'

'Not foolish at all. I'm glad you came. There's no need of explanations.'

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At the end of the sea wall beside which they were walking came a railway line. They could go no further without descending on to the beach. The girl leant forward on to the rail, Carr beside her. They looked into a darkness almost absolute, less penetrable than the future, less penetrable than another's mind. She turned to him, threw one arm over his shoulder rather clumsily, lifted her face up to him.

She is trembling more now, he thought, as they kissed. For two minutes, three, four, they continued to embrace. Carr made only the necessary minimum responses. He put his hand lightly to her breast over her coat, and the trembling became stronger.

'Darling,' the girl said in his ear, 'darling,' like a child repeating an adult's word whose meaning it doesn't know.

Well, why not? He attempted to simulate some passion, leaning back against the rail and pulling her against him. Why not, if this is what she wishes?

But then suddenly they were parted. By whose impetus? It was impossible to say. One moment they were mouth against mouth, the next she was bending low over the rail her face hidden from him. And the vital thing was to give her back her self-respect.

'I think we stopped in time. Anything more would have been too foolish. It's too late now that I am going away. Perhaps had we earlier it might have been beautiful.'

She was not trembling, but he thought that she was probably weeping, yet when she turned her head he saw that her eyes were dry.

'I suppose it wasn't intended. I have wanted you for a long while,' he lied. 'But now it is too late. It would complicate things impossibly.'

Was she listening to him at all, or wrestling with some dark feminine virgin's demon that he could never know?

'Oh, my dear,' he said with genuine pity.

After a while he said, 'Come. It's time we went, I think.'

Walking back, she said in a brightly conversational tone, 'I'm sorry you're going.'

'Tell me, why don't you leave, get away from here?' Carr said. 'There's nothing to keep you. You ought to see a little more of the world. Go West, young woman.'

His facetiousness shattered against the force of her gravity.

'There is Martin,' she said, to baffle him utterly.

'Oh, yes, Martin.'

He could tell her about the nature of loyalty: how, while it may be the one rock to which a man may cling for life, it can to another be a succubus destroying both possessor and possessed. 'I see what you mean,' he said.

When they came back to the road he asked her whether she would like to go for a drink or a coffee, but she declined. They walked back the way they had come, along the shadow-blocked promenade.

'I'm seeing you home, not you me,' the girl said. 'I brought you out. It's only right.'

He made no protest. Outside his house they stood facing each other. This time the light was on the girl's face. His own face consciously softened, Carr looked down at her with a sexless tenderness: the high white forehead, the declivities accentuated by shadow, down to the silly unformed mouth, with its lip-stick smeared; the white moulded chin.

She faced his scrutiny steadily. She said: 'I know a great deal more than I used to, more I think than a lot of people ever know.'

'Such as?'

'We've got to let things happen to us. It's like they had already happened.'

'Yes,' Carr said. He felt disinclined for metaphysics.

'It may be different for a man, but I can only do what I've got to do. I shall be tied to that for my whole life, and it's started already. It's started already,' she repeated.

'Then they bade good night.'

THE grass around the fountain was a rich yellow green in the thin sunlight; a small child in a shapeless pink frock was running across to the fountain, her legs stiff, so that she rocked at each stride as if she were on the point of overbalancing; against the crumbling wall a dog rolled on its back; the squeal of a bus's brakes; the smell of an old man on a seat; two birds flew past in love or combat. Robinson watched the girl, who had once been his girl, mount the steps of the cinema, push back the glass doors and pass within.

A woman ran across the brilliant grass, seized the child by the arm and dragged her away, her cries mounting in the beneficent Sunday air. The birds disappeared behind the War Memorial. Robinson walked on; already the girl was out of his mind.

He had raised his eyes and she had been there in front of him, the incline of her head, the lines of her back and legs as familiar to him as his own room. Two, perhaps three, strides he quickened, then the load of his despair settled again, and he was bound in his hopelessness as in a winding sheet. He had followed her, keeping his eyes on her back, as a dog might follow a familiar scent; but how could he approach her, how communicate? Any stranger might have walked up to her, taken her by the arm, spoken and been understood; but he had gone too far, like the sick man in the hospital bed who stares at the wall as his family gather about him, or the soldier travelling on the lorry to the battle-front ignoring the girls waving between the hedges. And he did not even want to speak to her. After the first instinctive quickening of recognition there had come a sudden anguished apprehension of the measure of his loss . . . and then nothing, no feeling, no regret, only despair.

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Still, he had followed her until she had crossed the golden grass, had passed the dry fountain and the pink child, until she had gone out of his sight beneath the gaudy posters.

Now Robinson walked on, the wintry sun on his head.

Some thirty hours previously Hargreaves had said, 'I've just told the police.'

Robinson had the gun and cartridges in his pocket.

'Couldn't put it off any longer. First light this morning zero hour. Made up my mind if it hadn't turned up then I'd suck my neck out.'

Anger had come first, violent, overwhelming, like a stroke. A silent, consuming anger at the malevolence of fate that had defeated him only by hours. Then his anger was diverted upon Carr, who had taken the gun from him, who had been drinking—'I wasn't caught up. I was getting drunk,' rubbing his sweating hands together—when he should have handed over the gun, when it would not have been too late. Now it was too late.

Hargreaves had said, 'What did you come back here for last night?'

It was scarcely worth while lying but he had done so.

Hargreaves had said, 'There are only a few people who could have taken it. I expect the cops will find out.'

Too late, too late even for anger. Only despair. It was the last blow that he could take, its effect perhaps all the greater for the illusory hope that had preceded it. Now he was done for.

Had he been asked where he was walking he could not have said, but his feet were carrying him to the breakwater.

And as Robinson made his sad way to the breakwater, the sun shone through the lace curtains on Carr, lying on his back in his landlady's bed. One of his hands rested palm downwards on her hip, quite still; otherwise they were not

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touching. In this ecstasy there was no sensuality; simply the release from the body.

He was not lying on the bed watching the slow, dying fly crawl over the ceiling. He was the fly, was the mottled ceiling, was the rumpled sheets beneath his back, the moist flesh beneath his hand, was the meagre December sunlight. All he had seen of the world, all heard, smelt, tasted, touched, formed a single, self-complete design. He was incorporeal and time had stopped; the flicker of the fly's wing endured for an aeon; the friction of its legs on the plaster reverberated like all the world's orchestras playing together a single note. Not dream, not sleep, not waking. A single image of sea birds, infinitely beautiful, swooping, plunging, floating, white against a Mediterranean-blue sky held his vision; and in their gyrations there was a transcendent pattern—of which he was part—containing all of time and space. But behind all—like a streak of red holding together a sombre, woody painting—was the will, and a cough, no, less than a cough, the flutter of an eyelid, the contraction of a pore and this beauty would be shattered. Carr awaited the pore's contraction.

Later he made polite conversation as he dressed. His landlady still lay in the bed, the blankets over her body, her hands clasped under her head. Her eyes followed his movements incuriously.

As Carr stooped to the mirror on her dressing-table to fasten his tie—it would have seemed an invasion of the privacy of her bedroom to have altered the angle of the glass—he caught her reflection and thought with a sad irony on the nature of the instrument upon which he had to play to create his music. Since his wife had left him the act of love had come to mean for him only those fragile, tenuous seconds afterwards when the body was dissolved; for that and that alone the fret, the turmoil, the incredible intimacy. He turned from the mirror and smiled at her.

'Were you surprised?' he asked her.

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She said with what might have been humour, 'Do you always wait so long between?'

He would have known whether she too experienced the ecstasy, but there was no way she could have told him, or that he could ask her. He said lightly, 'Oh, I'm getting old.'

'You don't do so bad.'

'Thank you, ma'am,' Carr replied, and added kindly, 'You're not so bad yourself.'

He was suddenly struck by the look of morbid loneliness on her face, but before his pity had blossomed realized with a shock that it was merely the ordinary human condition.

She said, 'Well, you don't have to wait so long next time.'

They were the most personal words she had ever said to him.

'O.K. One should take one's exercise regularly,' he answered with deliberate vulgarity.

As he was combing his hair, she said, 'How's Carol?'

'Carol, why are you always so interested in Carol?'

'Perhaps it's because I haven't a child,' she said.

'Oh, well,' he said. Once he had seen a woman pointing to an empty sky.

He went over to her, took hold of the lobe of her ear between his thumb and first finger as he looked down at her. The lipstick was smeared around her mouth; he had not kissed her sufficiently to obliterate it. There were still beads of moisture among the hairs on her upper lip and above her eyebrows. As he pinched her ear between his nails her face twisted and contracted, the skin forming deep furrows.

'You're hurting,' she said unconcernedly.

He bent down and kissed her forehead.

'Have a nice sleep, ducky,' he said as he departed.

And at the breakwater too the gulls were swooping. The sunlight had gone; a thin fog was coming up over the

estuary. With his thumbnail, Robinson flaked off pieces of the stone and watched them slide down into the sea. The coldness racked him like a drawn nerve, but an utter inertia prevented him from moving.

A sliver of black wood was borne in by the tide and lapped against the breakwater immediately beneath him so that the flakes of stone which he pared, fell around it. It seemed to him that if one of the fragments were to strike the wood it would miraculously save him. He could not, of course, take aim—it had to be left to the fates—but he dug more fiercely into the stone. The piece of wood, however, that had been lobbing against the breakwater as if attached to a line, suddenly recoiled more violently than before and was swept away. He went on paring the stone, the jerking of his thumb his only movement.

He was aroused from his torpor by two of the gulls that swooped out of the grey twilight, within a few feet of him to attack some decaying animal carcass that was being carried in by the sea. As the first landed on the water, Robinson saw its maroon beak and claws sink into the corruption. Then the other gull was upon it. Their lewd cries rent the stillness as if the air were being torn apart in pain. They fought in a flurry of dirty white and water. He could see the oil on their feathers, their beady and pitiless eyes. Then one flew off and the other rose in pursuit, abandoning the salt-sodden corpse. Robinson watched their whiteness fade into the evening gloom, then stiffly he rose and walked back to the shore.

TYING up the loose ends! 'I'm going down South,' Carr said. 'I have an interview next week, but it's virtually certain. I have decided that I am a creature of the South; there crime is passionate and languorous, not merely brutal and utilitarian as in the barbaric North.'

'Words, words, words,' the detective said affably.

'And policemen are courteous.'

There was a pause. Carr looked around the drab office that reminded him of an orderly room. Another point of departure, never to be seen again . . . to cease to exist?

'Well, you'll have a story before you go,' the detective said.

'I'll have to give a month's notice, of course. I haven't gone yet. What story?'

'Within these four walls, of course,' the detective said perfunctorily. 'Jean McCarless. We're making an arrest. Should have him in a day or two.'

'The one you thought?' Carr's interest was only on the journalistic level.

'The boy friend, Eddy, chap who kept her. We've known for a while, but now we think we've got the stuff to pull him in.'

Well, another conclusion. 'You may as well tell your astounded Watson.'

'Within these four walls.'

'Oh, let me go out in a blaze of glory,' Carr said lightly. 'Let me show my unregenerate employers how good a man they are losing.'

'It might be a good thing,' the detective said slowly. 'Yes, it might indeed. Perhaps if we make him jump . . . I think you can say—not officially, of course—that we'll be making an arrest before the week's out. If I give it to

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you it'll be one in the eye for that old fool Evans. He's been on at me every day, every day, you couldn't imagine. Don't bring me in it, of course.

'We understand—or whatever your formula is—we understand that a man who has been kept under observation here and in other towns will before the end of the week appear before the magistrates charged with in that he did and so on.'

'It's as definite as that, is it?' Carr said. 'Well, let's have the story. Between these four rather fly-blown walls, naturally.'

'Time it was painted again,' the detective said, looking up. 'There isn't much of a story. We've known it was him for a while. The husband was at sea and we couldn't see your boy friend, young Robinson, in the role. It might have been a playmate she'd newly acquired, but somehow . . . Then this fellow started hanging about the town. I think he wanted to be caught, I mean unconsciously, inside him, a lot of them do, you know—thank God, but I know some superintendents who couldn't make an arrest even so. I think it was him who hit young Robinson. You remember you told me. That helped. Well, we had pics of him, spotted him, kept tabs on him. Interviewed him, of course. I take credit for this: the Super wanted to be tough with him, but I played it nice and sweet.'

'I can imagine, like Himmler.'

'He's a queer chap, like a gypsy, but a town gypsy, in a fair number of rackets, but nothing of the spiv about him. Perhaps what you would call an individualist, an anachronism in the Welfare State.'

'You're learning,' Carr said. 'We'll make a detective out of you yet. It is the duty of men of good will to be bad citizens. That's what I always say next. It is called an epigram.'

'He reminded me of a poacher I did once years ago for malicious wounding. He took a knife to one of my boys, so we—the poacher, I mean—so we gave him a going-over,

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but not a squeak out of him. He just looked at us all the time as though we were dog-dirt.'

'One of nature's aristocrats.'

'Where was I? Oh, yes, funny, for a while we had our eye on that little runt Hyams. It was Mrs. Flowers who gave us it in the end.'

'Mrs. Flowers?' Carr said.

'The woman who found her,' the detective said. 'Lived below.'

'Oh, yes, Mrs. Flowers.'

'Well, she knew all about it. It's a long story. He owned the whole house, you see. He had his fancy piece on one floor and Mrs. Flowers had the other. She knew him, of course. She's got a record for doing a bit in a nice way. Perhaps he's her manager, we don't quite know.

'Anyway, he'd been round earlier while his woman was drinking with young Robinson, and Mrs. Flowers saw him then. He must have waited outside and gone in when young Robinson cleared off, found her all panting and dewy-eyed and—sturdy individualist—polished her off.

'Well, he came back a couple of days later, told Mrs. Flowers what he'd done and what he'd do to her if she said anything. I suppose he had to tell someone. Whether he wanted to be caught or not, but he couldn't leave well alone, and he kept on threatening her with razors, acid and so on—until she really got the wind-up and came to us and spilled. Well, that's it.'

'Can I say an important witness will be the woman who found the body?'

'No, leave it as I gave it you, there's a good chap, Derek.'

'When it goes to trial, Robinson will have to give evidence,' Carr said reflectively. 'That'll shake him.'

'Do him good,' said the detective shortly, 'lecherous young bastard.'

'Ha, envy!' Carr said, assuming again, despite himself, the role of clown he always found himself playing with the

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detective. 'You in the part of outraged virtue! If you'd been offered it when you were his age and still capable of accepting, you'd have given her a Boy Scout's salute and . . .'

The detective smiled faintly, 'I could tell you some stories,' he said. 'A young constable on the beat has his moments, especially around the docks.'

'The operative words being on the beat.'

'Dead-beat,' the detective replied.

'A beatific death anyway,' said Carr, not to be outdone.

And their virile masculine laughter buffeted the walls of that small room.

THE next morning Carr considered getting in touch with the girl, but it was she who telephoned him.

'Who are they going to arrest?' she asked.

'I think I'd better see you,' he said.

They met in a café.

'I've virtually got that job,' Carr said.

She said, 'Who are they going to arrest?'

'Eddy, he, the man who kept her. He . . . ' To the waitress he said, 'Two coffees, please.'

When the waitress had gone he said, 'It's on a paper where the news editor's a friend of mine.'

'Will Martin have to give evidence?'

'Oh, I expect so,' Carr replied with deliberate indifference. 'Holmes, the sergeant, told me all about it. They'll be pulling him in in a day or two, Eddy, I mean. It was like this. It seems . . . '

When he had told her, she said, 'Have you seen Martin since? How's he taking it?'

'I haven't seen him.'

'I thought you might have,' she said, but continued quickly, to conceal the implied reproach. 'He'll have to give evidence and it will, I mean all the story will, it will have to all come out.'

'Yes,' Carr said.

'It will be so discreditable,' the girl said.

She had paused before selecting the final word, and its exactness and suitability made Carr for the first time since their meeting become properly conscious of her. It had happened before, he thought: that by some phrase or gesture she would thrust herself out of her young girl's nullity and make herself individual to him. He paid his tribute.

'Discreditable, yes,' he said. 'That is a very fitting

word. His part in it has not been a very praiseworthy one.'

'Nor has it with any of us.'

He looked at her with raised eyebrows, and she coloured slightly but did not retract.

'I mean none of us, all of us in it have come out, not shown up in it very well. Oh, it's been so squalid, horrible.'

'Whatever my role,' Carr said with some asperity, 'I don't see you have anything to reproach yourself with.'

'Don't you?' the girl said very quietly, looking down into her coffee cup.

The sadness with which she spoke again stirred Carr's awareness, but on a deeper level. He paid her the compliment of saying something which at that moment he thought might be true.

'Quite irrespective of anything you or I or anyone else may have done or not done, it is his disaster, if it is a disaster for him. We are only the other actors in it. One cannot escape oneself. If it hadn't been this it would have been something else sooner or later.' He raised his voice a little at the end, as if he were defying something or somebody.

'That isn't what you said before,' the girl said. 'You had blamed yourself.'

For a moment he did not answer, hesitating between bluster and capitulation. 'All right, it's true,' he said finally. 'The young are always destroyed by their elders. We're all like barmaids—we eat our children, as they used to say. It gives us indigestion, of course, and if we were still alive ourselves that would be a killing disease.'

He had saved his face by surrendering in generalization and paradox.

The girl made no pretence of understanding him.

'I'll have to see him again,' she said.

'I don't see what you can do,' Carr said weakly, emptying his cup.

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'I'll see him this evening. Would you meet me afterwards?'

'All right,' Carr said, 'if you wish it.'

Robinson had surrendered himself utterly to the absence of hope. It was more than a surrender, as a woman's submission to a ravishment unconsciously sought becomes an embrace.

His bed was violently unmade, the blankets, bedspread, sheets, pillows bundled in disorder. He had been ceaselessly scraping at his rash and--his face in shadow as he leant forward beneath the weak electric lamp--a livid red weal scarred his jawbone. There was a general sensation of itchiness about him as if he were garbed from head to toe in coarse, unclean wool. It was cold in the room but at the same time stuffy, so that his face was flushed. He felt as if he had not been outside for a long time, like one kept in isolation for fear of spreading contagion.

Behind him something rustled and he experienced an irrational panic. He started and turned, then he rose, opened a cupboard, bent to peer beneath the bed before resuming his seat. Stillness in the room, except for the ticking of the watch upon his wrist. He began to yawn deeply, like an old man, his yawns drawn from the pit of his stomach, expiring in staccato exhalations like groans. How boring it is to be about to die! It was as if life were already withdrawing from him, as parasites hasten to leave their hosts once they are stricken.

Robinson had consciously taken the decision to kill himself after he had read in the paper of the imminence of an arrest, but he had recognized the idea of his self-slaughter like an old friend. The paper was now on the table in front of him. Upside down, the stark black print was reduced to its quintessential meaninglessness, like the scrawlings of a machine undirected by a human will.

Death was in the room; outside were houses, streets,

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people, they had always been there, would always be there—he could hear a dog barking, the mechanical voice of a radio, a train's clatter—it was only this room that was mortal, subject to change, the watch like a toy, the wind gusting down the blocked-in chimney, his own unsteady breathing.

A life coming to its end prematurely—there was no great pitifulness about that. During the war many thousands of lives similar to his own had been abridged; that thought had come into his mind as a kind of consolation after he had recognized and admitted the stranger with his face in shadow who whispered, 'You will suffer like this always so long as you live.' He had reflected on the protracted agony of many of those deaths, and of other deaths occurring at this and every moment; by comparison, his own quietus would be brief and without turbulence. A little terror, a little agony, and the self, the self that would suffer always in the same way so long as it existed, would be no more.

The memory of the trip he had made with the girl to the green island came to his mind, and he thought how good it would have been then, had it not been necessary that he should die. There was a period of shaded lucidity when he had questioned, tried to persuade the stranger. Unpleasant the ordeal of giving his evidence, exposed to the contempt of the many, unpleasant the punishment for his theft of the gun, no doubt, but people would soon forget and then the familiar pattern of living could be taken up again, or he could go elsewhere, evolve a new pattern . . . but the stranger had said only, 'You will suffer like this always so long as you live.'

Now he protested no more; he had accepted the stranger's message, and his impending death was already a thing of substance, concrete, familiar, having a more precise reality than the table beneath his forearms, the sweating window, the tick of the watch, the wind in the chimney. Only there was a little stir of disquiet in his

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stomach, such as a shy or sensitive person might experience before entering another's house for the first time. It was a physical manifestation; his stomach rumbled and he rose to go out to make water.

He pulled the plug: the flurry of water dragged a part of him down with it (as a small child he had had the fear that in the swirling currents of the lavatory bowl he would be swallowed up and dragged away), to be sucked in to pipes, sewers, dark rivers that ran below the surface on which life was maintained.

When he returned to his room it was like stepping into a crowd. Death had left it momentarily and the room had come alive in his absence, full of small movements and sounds. On his entrance life fled again, the vibrations gradually dying, as when a hand steadies the swinging tubular bells that some careless gesture had set jangling.

He took the same seat at the table below the light. He yawned.

Then the knock came at the door.

A GROTESQUE thing happened before they met. Carr was waiting for the girl outside a hatshop at the foot of the empty arcade. The shop window had been decorated for Christmas and there were several small models of Father Christmas, pink-checked with cotton-wool beards and bright red robes, arranged with a lush elegance on stands among the swan-necked plaster heads. Suddenly a cat pushed between curtains at the back of the window, picked its way fastidiously over the floor and clawed with its sandy paw at one of the models above it. The doll toppled and fell on to the cat. Briefly it remained balanced at a jaunty angle on the cat's head, as in sudden panic the animal ran, the doll jiggling with it for a few paces before falling on to the floor. The cat scuttled back between the curtains. Carr laughed aloud.

So it was that he was laughing as the girl came up and he turned to greet her. He had a vision of himself, laughing, against the Modigliani heads within the window, the girl approaching in uneasy bewilderment from out of the cavernous shadows of the arcade. He banished the vision hastily, but was laughing still, shaking his head to indicate his inability to speak, as he, laughing, and the girl came face to face.

Her expression, her testy, nervous enquiry seemed added cause for laughter. He waved his hands impotently. The girl's expression of annoyance grew more pronounced . . . and then there was nothing comical any longer and he stopped laughing.

He gesticulated towards the window. 'A cat. It seemed so funny. One of those Father Christmasses fell on its head. The cat's, I mean. I can't describe it, but it was comical. You would have thought so had you seen it.'

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He bent down to her, looking into her eyes. 'I'm sorry,' he added.

The girl turned her head away.

'Yes, I have been crying,' she said. 'I don't often, but . . . Come on.'

Carr took hold of her arm above the elbow, squeezed it briefly and then dropped his hand.

'Was it bad?' he said.

'Would you mind if we went to the Gresham?'

He concealed his surprise. 'Of course not.'

Compassion or tenderness? Because, Carr wondered as they crossed the almost deserted, puddled square, of a white face, tired skin around the eyes, an unsteady mouth . . . or was it Carr whom he mourned for? His pallor, sunken eyes, his compressed lips!

'I saw him,' the girl said in an expressionless voice.

'Was it bad?' Carr asked again.

He sensed rather than saw her gesture of rejection.

Entering the Gresham with her tinged his feeling of tenderness with a protective tint. They were entering a world in which she was an innocent - or perhaps no longer! She preceded him by a pace as they walked up the steps and between the tables in the lounge. Watching her, Carr recalled the deportment of the sandy cat.

As they sat, he told her of this, observing her carefully. She smiled briefly. When her mouth was in repose, he noticed, she held one corner a little higher than the other and this might have given her a puckish air had her eyes been less grave.

They were at a comparatively secluded table in a corner distant from the bar, having sat, like flowers turned to the sun, facing the raised dais of the band.

'Like marionettes, aren't they?' Carr said, indicating the instrumentalists, whose ritual movements seemed utterly dissociated from the plangent music that filled the air as if it were one of its chemical components.

Again she smiled fleetingly, as if she were genuinely

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amused, but only just; as if that were the most amusement she was capable of experiencing in anything.

Carr felt that any further small talk would be intolerable, but her calm was like a thin lacquer that might flake off at a sudden jar. He had no words for her and covered his embarrassment by turning to look for a waiter.

Still there was nothing to say.

The drinks were placed in front of them. He paid. Nothing to say.

'If you wished it, I would take you away from here,' he heard himself saying, moving his hands palms upwards to delineate the smoke-filled lounge and far beyond.

The lacquer did not crack. Only the grave eyes, like dark pebbles at the bottom of a pool, turned on him reflectively.

'Oh, we are all murderers,' Carr cried urgently. 'All of us who are alive. Father-killers, mother-killers, wife-killers, child-killers. It's the mark of our manhood, distinguishes us from the beasts. How can we keep alive ourselves, unless'—and he smiled and his eyes became brilliant—'or perhaps, rather, yes, yes, like the murdered lover in the ballad, dead ourselves, we know that only when the other is dead can we truly embrace. Murder is love.'

He went on vehemently: 'Can't you see that poor bloody gypsy? He killed his woman and then found that he wasn't dead himself. She had escaped him. Why do you suppose he kept hanging around? He's no fool, owns restaurants, pin-table saloons, no fool. Why threaten that other woman, follow young Robinson, the club, station . . .' Carr broke off, his thoughts running ahead of his ability to make words, like an inexperienced typist.

'It would be a great cruelty to do away with capital punishment. The gallows the true register office, or marriage bed. The street, lights in all those windows, like islands. Or, hitting Robinson, perhaps because he was the last to have been with her, had had her dead almost, was touched with it, hitting him, getting nearer to her . . .'

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She had said nothing and he had been looking at her without seeing her, and yet it was as if she had cried, 'Stop, oh stop, in the name of mercy.'

Carr was conscious of his trembling hands, anhelation and a pulse beating below his eye. He took a deep breath, dropped his head, made a placatory movement with his hands. But he could say nothing.

He drank. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'Sometimes I make words, they run away with me.'

'I think I understood you,' the girl said.

But he did not hear her. 'I did tell you I would, if you wished it, take you away from here,' he said. 'You didn't answer. I meant it.'

He had never found it more difficult to construct his sentences; his words, flat without timbre, dropped like coins into sand.

'I wanted to come here,' she said evenly, moving her eyes around the room as if admiring a landscape.

He was startled by the seeming irrelevance of her reply.

She went on, 'I told you I saw Martin. Now more than ever I know I've got to stand by him until he's all right again.'

Oh, that special feminine tact! He understood that she was rejecting his offer without even acknowledging that he had made it. Was it relief that quickened the beat of his timorous heart?

'He'll never be all right again. Never, in the way you mean it. Things can never be as they were---with him, or you with him. You know it, you've known it all the time. Why see yourself I'm not being rude in this female role of man's soul-saver?'

'Perhaps,' the girl said softly.

In a kinder tone, he said, 'Can you tell me about it?'

She was sitting forward on the edge of her chair, looking over his shoulder, her pose suggesting perhaps that she was

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listening for something. She turned her glass by the stem between her fingers.

'Alice, Alice, please.'

'When I knocked he didn't answer, or didn't answer properly. He just shouted out something, but didn't come to the door. It sounded like, "Yes, I know, I know." So I knocked again, and he came, but not straight away. He hadn't shaved. He said it was because of his rash—you know he's had a rash on his face—and he wanted to give it a chance to get better. "

'I don't know how to tell you,' the girl went on, still calmly. 'I wish I could express it better. I often wish I had a better vocabulary.'

Touched, Carr smiled faintly, reassuringly.

'It was like, like as if he was acting, you know. You know how I mean? Someone, when someone is doing something that isn't natural to them, they do it as if they were imitating someone doing it. You do know what I mean?'

'What was he like then?' Carr said, noticing how the white skin of her throat moved as she swallowed.

'He didn't smile at all, not at all, but he was so polite, so, so stiff, formal. He pulled up a chair for me. It had some clothes on it, but he took them off and hung them up and pulled up the chair for me. But that was all wrong because everywhere else in the room everything was all over the place. It was incongruous.

'I asked him why he hadn't been to work, and he said he hadn't been feeling very well and was just taking a day or two off. Oh, he apologized for not having any cigarettes. That was it, yes, that was it, that was really funny,' the girl went on, remembering. 'He said he hadn't been out, and then just after, nothing to do with it, he said he'd been to the breakwater. It wasn't like, like a lie, somehow, oh, I can't explain.'

For the first time since she had started talking she seemed agitated, but the cause, it appeared, might equally

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as well have been her inability to express herself as the recollection of the scene she was describing.

'Why should he tell a lie like that, Derek?'

'Heaven knows'—with a shrug. 'What else?'

'It was so, so unintimate.' She still spoke quietly, but her words had now greater urgency. 'It was as if I wasn't there. I mean the way he behaved, I felt I wasn't there. At first he stood up, walked about a little, all around the room, behind me too, and I couldn't hear, couldn't hear him. Later he lay down on the bed and just looking at the ceiling, even when he was talking to me, as if he was talking to me and I wasn't there. I mean I felt as if . . . it was like when you're half asleep and can hear people talking, know what they're saying, and yet be sort of dreaming at the same time.'

Cary automatically lifted his glass and drank a little and the girl followed suit.

'I asked him if he had read about a man going to be arrested, and he said he had. And I said, "I suppose you'll have to give evidence. Martin," thinking that that was what was bothering him, mainly. He said, "Oh, yes, I suppose I shall." But he didn't seem concerned, not at all.'

'He didn't seem concerned?'

'No, not concerned at all. He just said . . .'

'Did you tell him it was Eddie?'

'He just said, "I suppose I shall." Yes, I told him.'

'Well, what did he say to that?'

'I can't remember.' Again she was turning the glass between her fingers. 'No, I can't remember. I don't think he said anything. That was queer too, wasn't it? You'd think he'd be interested.'

'And that was all?'

'I told him it was you who told me it was Eddie. I think he said, "Oh, Derek, he'd know." Oh, no, no. No, I remember. He said, "Derek would know, but Derek doesn't know everything." And he did smile

then, he did smile then. That was the only time he did smile.'

'I would not deny it,' Carr said. .

'He was lying on the bed and he smiled.'

Carr put his hand on the girl's lying on the table. 'Alice, there is nothing you can do,' he said earnestly. 'Nothing more; you must finish it.'

'I can't finish it.' She spoke almost petulantly, like a child contradicting, with whatever futility, a pertinacious adult.

'The room was very stuffy, smelly,' she went on hurriedly. 'I've told you how everything was in a mess. But somehow everything seemed very still, as if it, as if it was frozen. You know I did most of the talking after the beginning, after he'd asked me how I was and so on; and he just answered me, more or less. And then when I stopped talking he didn't say anything, as if he hadn't realized I'd stopped, just lying there on the bed. It was sinister somehow. But lying there on the bed, not saying anything. I really might not have been there at all.'

For the first time Carr envisaged the scene she was describing: the sad and shabby room, the girl—her outlines dim in the fading light—sitting uneasily away from the walls, alert and impotent; he on the soiled bed, like a sick animal, solipsistic, his pain the only reality.

And now she was in front of him and he had nothing to offer that could help her. Still she was too innocent, had not suffered enough. Robinson had passed through the whirlpools into the dead sea that is called maturity, but she had still the pristine resilience of the child who cannot understand an adult's uneasy compromises.

'I got up and after I'd said something he got up to, and, well, I just went. What else could I have done? What would you have done? You understand more.'

Carr winced. 'You were right not to trust me,' he said. 'At the very beginning. Remember?'

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She looked at him thoughtfully. 'We understand each other better now.'

'But still you do not trust me.'

She would not know that trust can exist only where its opposite has been and has been effaced. That was something else that the world would teach her, a lesson that she could not learn without yet greater pain.

She said, without bitterness in her voice, 'Does that matter? How would it help if I did? I don't think you can help me at all.'

This time he did not wince. 'Well, it may be . . .'

'Why, look, there's that man Hyams,' the girl said brightly, conversationally, indicating over the heads of the drinkers.

He did not follow her look. The familiar spasm of hatred born of his self-contempt contracted his viscera.

'Shall I tell you about Hyams?' he said. 'Understand Hyams and you understand everything, or everything a young girl needs to know.'

He paused, feeling again, over his desire to wound, that sense of a significant moment, when there were words waiting to be spoken that could reduce the tangle of motives—fears, appetites, vanities, action and reaction—to a single significant string leading to the maze's centre.

'Hyams is the chorus of the drama,' he began. 'Or Hyams is like those homuncules in radio discussions, who feed the experts with their platitudes, the collective ignorance of the unconscious; the common man.' (This is not it at all; this is not what I want to say.) 'Or he is the king's jester, the aristocrat's valet. Only this is the age of the common man, so Hyams should be our model.'

'Hyams wants to be loved. That is the secret. It is a desire born of his cowardice, because in the deep soap-scented bath of love he can forget that he is alone and that he is a man.'

This was not what he had wanted to say. Whether the

girl understood or not was unimportant, he was speaking for himself, but as one knot was untied so another formed and one was further away than ever from the centre.

'Hyams hates Martin, because Martin has the seeds of greatness in him.'

He was astonished by what he had said; it was a discovery.

'Poor Martin, with all his shoddy lusts and pretences, fantasies of manhood, somewhere buried within him were, are potentialities, the smell of an individual. Trust the Hyamses to nose it out, to worry it, ravish it. If there's one thing they hate it's an individual.'

He stopped speaking. He had made another discovery. He took a long gulp from his glass, looking slyly over the top of it at the girl to see how much she had discerned. She was looking down at the table as one might avert one's eyes from another's shame.

He said feebly, 'The man protests too much.'

The instinct was strong to go on, to spill meaningless words, and not to consider that which had just padded out among those earlier words like a monster hiding in the anonymity of a crowd. But the monster had to be faced.

He was Robinson—that was bad enough, but he had almost known it all the time. *But he was Hyams too.* Hyams with his dirty jokes, envy, and sick for love, Hyams with his ugliness and malice, and with his virtues also . . . That was what the words had revealed, that was the centre to which the string had led. *

The girl said timidly, 'I suppose we all want to be liked, loved.'

'Yes,' he replied dully, prolonging a blink, like an ostrich burying its head. 'That's the curse of it. That's when we start doing harm. Unlovable by nature, we have to pretend, distort ourselves to create that which can be loved. All untrue.'

'Oh, no,' he heard the girl whisper passionately, 'no.'

He opened his eyes and saw her leaning eagerly forward; her emotion seemed to narrow her face, tightening the young flesh taut over the bone.

'That isn't so,' she said. 'I know it isn't true. Oh, how can I explain? Why must you torment yourself, making everything the worst. Perhaps instead of *everyone* being horrible, *everyone* is lovable.'

Even as his tongue denied her words, he felt a sense of wonder, unsure, faint, yet real, as if she had uttered a benison. 'It's best to have no illusions,' he muttered, 'even the illusions that seem good for you.'

'But if after all they are not illusions?'

Oh, why could he not surrender to it and the peace it offered!

'Oh, yes,' he heard his own sardonic voice with a great distaste. 'Yes, that would be wonderful.'

Could he not say the words now, the words of acceptance, instead of those of rejection? Now. Now.

And then the wonder had gone.

The girl sighed.

The wonder had gone, and yet it had left something behind of itself some poor reflection, so that it was with a warm sense of pleasure that he observed her anger.

Laughing, he said, 'You look like you looked when you came up and I was laughing at the cat and the Father Christmas. You're angry!'

Her expression did not change, except that her lips tightened, moving down at the corners.

Carr, still laughing, said. 'Angry, Alice, why are you angry, Alice?'

He moved his position so that she had to look at him, and held his head on one side quizzically. 'I'm not sure it doesn't suit you,' he said appraising her mockingly. 'The colour in the cheeks, sparkle in the eye. If you could just relax the mouth a little. The angle of the head, too, haughty, imperious . . .

'That's better,' Carr went on, laughing, as the girl's face

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slowly softened, rounding, the skin on the cheeks moving upwards, the lips parting, eyes narrowing, as she too, laughing, leaned back, laughing.

‘That’s much better.’

And they were both laughing together.’

ALIGHTING at that particular bus-stop was a habit; the muscles moved of their own accord, bringing him to his feet, down the steps, on to the platform, off the bus.

Past the chemist's on the corner, left at the lamp-post. Automatically he moved closer to the privet hedge to avoid a woman pushing a pram. Some wood pigeons rose heavily from the elm tree in the garden of the bombed house, as Robinson turned into the road that contained his home.

A young man in a mackintosh, hatless, anonymous, walking with his head inclined because the wind was wet and raw on his skin. Habit moved his legs, swung his arms, inclined his head.

The houses, squat and identical, came almost to the road, a little dark earth, sodden grass, railings between them and the pavement.

He raised his head, and the thought came: all that I am seeing now I am seeing for the last time. There was a frozen moment of anguish in which all that surrounded him became sharply mnemonic. Past this bare tree with the dogs' excreta smeared around its base the bored schoolboy had dawdled; the young soldier home for his first leave had strutted like a cock by the whitewashed garage; and the satiated lover, still with the smell of his woman on him, had crept in the sweet, summer dawn along this stucco wall. A sick misery succeeded his agony.

His hand knew the precise degree of force required to push back the gate, his ear awaited its slow squeak, his feet carried him over the broken step. He questioned nothing that he saw; it was as if his vision and the house front were the two halves of a torn piece of paper that fitted exactly along their serrations.

The cat was sitting on the inner window sill and as he saw its eyes focused upon him he felt an urge to efface himself.

Where the centre of the doormat had been worn away there was a bare patch shaped like Ireland; he could have closed his eyes and drawn its outline, as a schoolboy can draw the map of his own country. He bent down, lifted the mat and picked up the key beneath. He unlocked the door and entered.

There in the dull winter light he imagined rather than saw the shapes: the hatstand, the mirror on the wall, the rush-bottomed chair, as it seemed they had always been, would be for ever, would go on existing, inanimate but existing, after . . . but there habit failed him. These inanimate existences became suddenly inimical, like the trees in a forest in which one is lost. A kind of vertigo assailed him as he stood, his hand still on the door, and an atavistic panic, as if in coming home he were re-enacting some ancient crime. Then the cat appeared again, squeezed past the door of the dining-room, and, tail vertical, moved slowly along the wall towards him. He watched it in horror. As it came level with him it paused, moving its head daintily towards him, but with a precipitate bound and spasm of pleasure passed him and through the door which he was holding open to freedom. Robinson slammed the door shut.

The spell was broken. The blood flowed back into his face, though he held his lips drawn apart in a grimace, combating nausea.

He moved forward and into the dining-room. There dimensions were distorted, so that, like a protagonist in a nightmare, he was reduced, moving among objects, shadows, distances that were extended: like a nightmare, too, the sense of only partial I-ness, of being both the observed and the observer.

The cloth had not been taken from the table; in the twilight shadow its whiteness was livid. He sat—habit

even in the nightmare still giving him his identity—on the chair on which he had always sat at that table, on the right of his father, the left of his mother, opposite to his sister. There were bread crumbs still on the cloth, and he put out his hand and scraped them together.

Why had he come? He did not know what it was that he had intended to do. It had seemed in the lonely madness of his hired room a simple thing: merely a sentimental visit before his departure to the place that he had known best. He had to avoid his family, and—cunning being one of the last faculties to desert the dying—had planned his visit for a day and time when he knew the house would be empty. But it was not empty: on his left was his father, on his right his mother, opposite his sister. They were the grave dignitaries of a tribunal, the hooded inquisitors; or they were his fellow conspirators.

He got up from the chair and went over to the window, resting his forehead against the cold glass as he stared unseeingly into the empty street. Gradually he became a little calmer. He turned quickly back to the room, as if, taking it by surprise, he could compel it to fall back into its normal proportions, to tell him that he was not going to die. He looked around—the dresser, the picture above the fireplace, the wireless, knitting on a chair, a book open face upwards—with a kind of despairing hopefulness. Everything that he saw was too familiar, however; there was nothing to impinge upon his imagination, and nothing to which he could turn his face and see reflected the self that he had been.

And so it was with the rest of the house. He went from room to room, opening and closing doors, cupboards, touching a chair here, lifting a garment there, smelling their different smells. He was like a puff of wind being blown purposelessly through the corridors among the darkening shadows. There was no feeling. Among all this he had lived in the intense intimacy of family, but now it was like an empty cupboard, offering no sustenance.

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In the bathroom he looked at his face in the mirror above the wash-basin; it glared back at him without meaning. It was the face that had grown up with him, in its familiarity unchanging, but now it was a doomed man's face and he experienced a sense of wonder that it could so resemble the face of that other one.

For memory had uttered its last protest and had died in the street outside, and now he moved among the shadows like a ghost that can wander the world and never find a home.

So he left the house, and did not look back, was absorbed again, mackintosh, hatlessness and anonymity, into the winter streets of the suburb.

MORNING. Waking. As Carr, snugly curled, came slowly to consciousness the surfaces of his skin responded with delight to the feather-wood warmth of the bed, the metal-cold air on the upturned side of his face, in their so close contiguity piquant like ice-cream and hot sauce in the mouth. The sweetness of living! Immediately, however, after he had registered his sensual satisfaction with a loosening of the muscles, a wriggle-- a deep sense of disquietude flooded his mind. He nuzzled his head into the pillow in an effort to escape from it into sleep, but there was no escape; it lay heavy within him, rancid and blighting. He surrendered and allowed himself to come to full wakefulness. His mind was full of Martin Robinson.

Carr lay on his back, dry skinned, staring at the ceiling, with Robinson in his head like a tumour.

There was a knock on his door. He lay still and did not answer. The door opened, his landlady's face appeared around it.

She said, 'It's half-past-nine.'

He did not even attempt to simulate sleep. 'Day off,' looking away from her.

He waited to hear the door close; hearing nothing, he turned his head. She was standing within the room, her hand on the door's inner knob. She had a dressing-gown over her nightdress and wore no make-up, like a wife.

Carr raised his eyebrows, coldly interrogative.

She took her time before replying placidly. 'You didn't tell me you were leaving.'

'Who told you?' he asked, without semblance of apology.

'I heard it.'

'Well, I might not be now,' Carr said conclusively, turning his head away from her again.

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He heard the door shut and knew that she was still in the room. She was in the room and Robinson was in his head.

She said, 'You might have told me, anyway. Why didn't you tell me?' Her voice was nearer.

He would neither look at her nor answer.

'Why didn't you?'

'It was all very indefinite, still is.'

She was standing by the bed. 'Would you like me to get in with you?' she said.

The woman in his bed or Robinson in his head?

'Shall I?' she said. 'You've only got to say.'

'Why not?' Carr said, speaking not only to her.

He did not move at all as she stepped into the bed beside him, and it was not until she had dropped a heavy leg over his body that he turned and gripped her. His movements were violent and untender, yet that morning he was rewarded with a simple uncerebral pleasure that he had not known with her before.

It was nearly noon when he left the house. It was twilight-dark; slate-grey clouds were being blown in over the estuary, piled on each other like animals being driven into a pen.

He could still see the four paragraphs of print before his eyes; it was as if his mind had frozen at the instant he had read them, so that he continued to experience that sense of 'this is what I was waiting for', the excitement and the fear.

She had given the newspaper to him as he had sat down, not dressed, unshaven, at the breakfast table. He had looked at the headlines on the front and back pages and had then folded the paper into four and had laid it beside his plate. His fifth prune was in his mouth when he saw the paragraphs at the foot of an outside column, beneath a 12-point heading.

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And as he walked along the wind-harried promenade it was still the lines of print that he saw, not the scene they described: the gypsy, blue-faced, hanging by a gaudy scarf from a hook in the wall of a squalid hotel room, his feet dangling, the overturned chair, the unmade bed, the envelope upright on the washstand.

And now he had to find Robinson. The woman was dead, the gypsy was dead, and too much time had been wasted already.

He turned off the promenade into a street of small boarding-houses, blank-faced in their winter torpor. Two dogs tumbled out of an entry yelping. Outside the Catholic church an Irish servant girl crossed herself. In the main street were buses, cars, walkers about their daily businesses, inscrutable as submarine animals. Carr crossed over blindly, and a cyclist swerved violently round him.

He increased his pace, carrying that incongruous feeling of bodily well-being with him, like a rich man's guilt. Above the Public Library the pigeons were all calling together, making a sound like running water. A shutter was banging repetitively, and in the arcade a torn piece of newspaper was blown around his ankles.

Behind the station he lost his way. A wide street without pavements, mud oozing up between the cobble-stones, on one side the sweating walls of warehouses, and on the other a tall fence, from which flapped torn posters - advertisements for cereals, laxatives, dances and wrestling matches. So over a narrow iron bridge above the railway lines, his heels clanging beneath him, and the rails below, criss-crossed, whirling, like the marks of skaters on ice.

He was breathing hard now, and the muscles above his ankles ached. On a corner below the bridge (and a train clattering over the rails, vibrating the stone beneath his feet) was a second-hand shop, with metal bedsteads, chairs, a faded sofa, thick china piled indiscriminately on the pavement.

To the grey-faced man who stood outside with a hammer

in his hand and bright, silver fishes on his American tie, Carr said, 'Can you tell me please where Railway Walk is?' and only half heard the reply, for the street was suddenly filled with the clatter of a horse-drawn goods cart.

'Thank you,' he said to the fishes.

The raw red brick of a Nonconformist chapel, and his eyes following automatically the shape of a bare-legged girl, picking her way over the cobble stones in high heels, yet still contriving to jerk her quarters in stiff, inelegant provocation.

And then he saw the name-plate and was in Railway Walk, and immediately there was a slackening of tension, as if in even having reached so far he had accomplished something. He looked at his watch, but his mind failed to register what his eyes had seen, and he had to look again.

The possibility of Robinson's not being there had never occurred to him, and when the woman told him, 'wiping her hands on her apron, he just said, 'Oh, oh well, sorry to have troubled you.'

He had begun to turn away and she had almost shut the door before he realized that he had not yet done enough.

'May I go up to his room to leave a message?'

The woman preceded him into the sour house smells and up the uncarpeted stairs. She stood at the door, still wiping her hands on the apron, as Carr went into the room.

He saw the newspaper, dropped open on the floor beside the unmade bed, and after that the room seemed very empty. Carr remembered the gypsy. Somewhere, once, a cat had also been hanged by the neck. He scribbled a note on a scrap of paper from his pocket and put it on the washstand, not bothering to weigh it down.

'He just went out. Half an hour ago, maybe,' the woman said. 'Less than half an hour ago it was.'

'Yes, yes, thank you.'

And down the stairs again.

'You only just missed him, less than half an hour.'

And in the street Carr looked at his watch again, and

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again his mind failed to register his eyes' message. He began to curse out loud, remembering his too warm bed.

He waited outside the office where the girl worked. As she came out she saw him in the doorway opposite without his having to attract her attention and came straight over to him.

He lit a cigarette and flicked the match away into the wind.

'It is most important that we should find him,' he repeated, carefully keeping his irritation out of his voice; her lack of comprehension seemed a wilful act of irrationalism.

'But, because the gypsy has hanged himself? That's better surely, because now there won't be any trial. You said the paper was there; he knows.'

Her protest was a plea for enlightenment, but he would not put the exact words to his fears.

'Yes, because the gypsy has hanged himself.'

'But I don't understand. Why is it so important we should find him? What can we tell him?'

'Because the gypsy has hanged himself, and if we don't find him soon, he may do the same.'

He had not said it before: not to the girl, not aloud; and now the words had somehow brought the act the nearer.

The girl's face seemed to expand in front of his eyes, coming closer. He put out his hands and grasped both her arms tightly as she swayed towards him.

'My dear, my dear. It may not be. I may be wrong, wrong utterly. Only I feel we've got to see him. Now it's all over, the woman, the gypsy, everything all over.'

She was firm on her feet again, but her face was distorted. He had the illusion that she was changing into something else before his eyes. He still had hold of her, and he rocked her gently as if he would check that calamitous growth.

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'The Gresham, of course he might be in the Gresham

She allowed him to turn her gently.

Up the steps into the lounge of the hotel was like entering an aquarium: a tabid, unlit greenness, without ripples.

'I'll ask the barman if he's seen him, anyway.'

So he asked the question, although already knowing the answer, leaving the girl standing by the entrance, in the huge and empty and silent room. He carried back to her a glass of beer and a small glass of brandy.

'We might as well have a drink while we're here.'

For now somehow there seemed no longer to be any urgency.

They sat down, and Carr said, 'He hasn't been in.'

'What is it?' the girl said, lifting her glass.

'To warm you. I'm sorry I frightened you,' Carr said. 'It was a silly thing I said.'

The girl sipped the brandy. 'Do you think it's really possible?'

'Anything is possible,' he said, still evading, he realized with weary resignation, although evasion had now finally and irrevocably become inconceivable for so long as he continued to exist. 'Possible, of course, but absurd.'

'Yes, absurd,' the girl said, with almost a laugh.

A waitress flounced out of a service room and across the lounge, allowing the door to swing to behind her . . . and the pool settled again.

'The gun,' the girl said, 'has he got that gun?'

'Does it matter? Does it really make any difference? A means, a symbol only. Gun or gas oven or . . . I only missed him by half-an-hour, you know, half-an-hour. I went as soon as I saw it in the paper, but I didn't see the paper until late this morning. My bed was too comfortable. And then the woman told me he'd gone out half-an-hour earlier.'

The girl had taken only the one small sip of the brandy.

'Sitting here we aren't looking for him,' she said, making no movement.

'Where else can we look?'

'Or would it make any difference if we found him? If he's made up his mind, what could we do, but, but postpone. We can't handcuff him to us for the rest of our lives. Perhaps we are sitting here just because we like sitting here,' she said, with the air of one making a discovery.

'I think I could stop him,' Carr said, believing that to be true, but believing also that it was in fact too late.

'How? By talking?' the girl said contemptuously.

'Yes,' Carr said, too loudly, so that the barman looked up from the newspaper that he was reading, perhaps in anticipation of a quarrel. 'Maybe even by talking, for it could be that it is by talking that he has been driven, or may have been driven to . . . How can we tell?' He asked the girl in a desperate appeal, and yet even if she granted him her green absolution, there was still no atonement.

She withheld it. 'Maybe we have never been looking for him, only for ourselves through him.'

'That isn't true for me,' Carr said. 'Unfortunately, I found myself only too many years ago.'

'I think I really wanted to help him, was not just being selfish and silly, like a young girl. At first, perhaps, yes, but later I chose to try to help, really meant to.'

'You know,' Carr said, as if offering a metaphysical hypothesis, 'perhaps I didn't choose him, perhaps he chose me, chose you too.'

'Does that make you feel better?' the girl said, the irony scarcely apparent.

'No,' Carr said harshly, so that it appeared that the barman's hope of a quarrel was being fulfilled. 'No, it does not. If he used me . . .' He jerked upright in his agitation and seized the arm of his chair. '. . . if he used me—and you . . . why I'd sooner be the agent than the victim. To hell with him for what he's done.' He added more softly: 'To us both.'

'Stop it,' the girl said. 'It doesn't help. If he chose us, we chose him too, or he was chosen for us and we were chosen for him. Does that seem more likely to you?'

'Perhaps,' he said, sinking back into his chair again. 'That doesn't make any difference, anyway. Or does it? I suppose it should, must . . .'

'Of course it must, if it is so.'

'All right,' Carr said. 'I suppose so.' He had had enough of it. If only this placid green water, cool and muffled, were their element, so that like fish they could nose their way in eternal circles between glass walls . . .

'He's at the breakwater,' Carr said. 'The breakwater.'

And so out of the tank, into the air, and yet there was still no sense of urgency. Taxis were lined up outside the hotel, but they walked, not slowly exactly, yet certainly not with celerity, not as if it mattered, for one or for two or for three, mattered whether they reached the breakwater before or after or during.

The road was wet, impressed with tyre marks, but no rain was visible in the air; only when they had passed beyond the shelter of the verandahs they could feel it on their faces like the touch of a damp lace curtain.

'Necessity,' Carr said. 'Wouldn't it be funny if everything we had ever done, felt, said, had been designed to bring us to this exact spot, at this exact time, with just the thoughts we have in our minds now, our feelings, the selves we are now?'

'Couldn't we have done any different then?' she said.

'Not that this moment is of particular significance, no more so than any other moment - shaving yesterday, in bed tomorrow.' He turned his head to the girl to answer her. 'I don't know, my dear, don't know. I suppose so.'

She said, 'It's really the first time, the first time I've been . . . below the surface.'

Where the road ended, two boys were playing on the beach with a dog. The boys were throwing sticks and the

dog barked shrilly as it ran backwards and forwards, churning up the sand.

Carr and the girl turned on to the path at the edge of the sandhills. It was low tide and they could not see the sea; the grey sand and the sky had merged in the rain-mist, but beyond they could hear the waves' persistent murmur.

'Do you remember when we walked in the park it was like this?' said the girl. 'Well, it was foggy then and it isn't now, but it was the same sort of, sort of cut-off feeling.'

Carr said, 'I remember meeting you for the first time. The bus. You know the woman died, don't you?'

'You told me.'

'Oh, yes, I remember.'

The path narrowed, and the sharp star grass, gleaming and heavy with rain, drooped over it from each side like willows. Here and there a few torn yellow sea poppies fluttered. Carr dropped behind the girl.

Their walk, it seemed to him, had imperceptibly become something self-contained and finite, its causes and that which would end it equally remote. He lifted his head into the lace of rain with a kind of buoyancy.

A snipe rose from the grass somewhere to the left of them, making a single, shrill call.

The girl stopped so suddenly that he bumped into her.

'He may not be there, you know,' she said. 'You only guessed.'

Carr said gently, 'We've got to go on now.'

'Why have we got to? We can choose, can't we?' Her hand was to her mouth and her head still turned from him so that her voice was muffled. 'Don't you think that I anyway have done enough? It's different for you; you're going away, you've finished with it, but I . . .'

He had forgotten. 'I may not be, not straight away anyway.'

' . . . shall never be able to get away. I mean will have it with me for always, whatever it is that we are going to see.'

'There are times when we may choose, perhaps, but others when we may not.' In a flash of lucidity, he added, 'If we turned back now, that you would certainly have with you always, world without end.'

All at once it was raining more heavily. He put his hand out to the girl but let it fall. Stepping round her so that he led the way, he said, 'I think we're nearly there now.'

'Yes, over that next high ridge.'

Near the top of the ridge the path had fallen away and Carr had to stoop to proceed, clutching with his hands at the clumps of tough grass, his face close to the dark, rain-pocked sand, with its pungent ammoniac redolence and evocation of childhood holidays, first love, life's sweetness.

The girl was somewhere behind him, but, standing on the ridge, looking down on to the grey semi-circle of beach beneath, he knew she was by his shoulder, and put out a hand to restrain her although she had made no movement.

And yet there was nothing to see - no dark ambulance, that might have been a hearse, or cluster of men moving impotently, fussily around disaster in the rain, ubiquitous dog yapping at their heels - so that it was with a sense of reprieve that he led the way down the slope, over the dunes to the beach by the breakwater: with a sense of reprieve, but also of a still greater disaster. A door had been blown shut; another was opening in the same cold draught.

Yet they went on, the rain heavy as they made their way over the sand, each drop creating its own miniature crater.

'He's there,' the girl said, clutching his arm. 'Look.'

She called the boy's name twice before he could stop her, and then he was running too, behind her at first, but then in front, running into the rain and to the breakwater, wet clumps of sand flying up from his boots, enjoying even the sheer physical effort of running, the exhilaration of the rain on his face, so that he called too, out of what was nothing more than simple well-being.

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And running too on the slippery green stone of the breakwater, running even as he approached the boy, who rose from whatever abject position he had chosen for his despair, running up to him even as he saw the gun—the symbol—in his hand, running and sliding on to him, clutching the boy's arms, calling in exuberant relief and affection, 'Fool, fool, you bloody fool.'

They fell together, Carr scarcely bothering to try to keep to his feet, and the gun must have gone off instantaneously, yet he was conscious of their falling, his arms around the boy, whose breath was warm on his cheek, of the jar as they hit the stone, before the agony in his intestines and the terror.

And he was alone, the boy's body no longer with him, lying on his back on the stone, an idea beating inside his head like a trapped bird, furiously endeavouring to escape, the boy's voice above him calling his name and the girl's, 'Mercy, sweet God, have mercy,' and the rain on his face.

'Are my eyes open?' Carr said. 'I can't see any more.'